



# SURRENDER

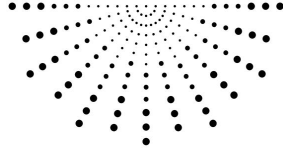
MATES FOR THE RASKARRANS

HEATHER FOX

# SURRENDER

MATES FOR THE RASKARRANS

BOOK 6.5



**HEATHER FOX**

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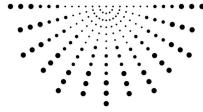
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# CHAPTER ONE



Grace

I'm not exactly surprised to find myself in the dreamspace. I felt the weight of a gaze constantly on me as we ate dinner, even without Molly's elbow in my side, her eyes darting in Calran's direction to draw my attention to him. Unlike the other raskarrans who looked everywhere at everyone, Calran never wavered, his eyes always on me.

Mercenia may not have put much effort into their medic training, not even bothering to teach us to read, leaving us to rely instead on memorised procedures, treatment checklists that rarely fit any patient perfectly. But the medics I trained under were as passionate about their profession as Shemza is. They taught me what Mercenia's rote learning couldn't. The power of dispassion, how to care deeply and not at all at the same time, how to coax the information you need out of a patient. How to observe them, read their tells and cues so you don't need to ask them anything at all. The raskarrans aren't like humans, but after several weeks living with them, I think I've got a pretty good read on their behaviour. I know the difference between someone like Callif, who's enamoured with the idea of having a mate and not any one of us girls in particular, and someone like Shemza, whose infatuation with Lorna wouldn't have diminished even if the dreamspace had never come for them.

The heartspace knows. That's what Rachel says Vantos says about their own mating. I think I've got a pretty good

read on when a raskarran's heartspace knows. And Calran, in the few glimpses I dared to take over dinner, was exhibiting all the signs.

He'd taken one look at me, and he'd known.

It's a thought that exhilarates me as much as it terrifies me.

I sit up, rising out of the mounds of soft furs I'm lying in, knowing it's going to be his face I see. Several emotions war inside me for dominance, but I take a breath, exerting my medic's control over them. Acknowledge them all one at a time, then set them aside. Happiness, fear, excitement, anxiety, delight, dread.

He's sitting in a chair opposite the bed, watching me with big brown eyes, a half smile curling up the corners of his full lips. His long hair hangs over his shoulders, streaked with grey, fine lines around his eyes. Older than most of the eligible raskarrans. It surprises me. In the quiet hours of the night, when sleep evaded me, I'd given some thought to what I would like my mate to be like. Older was the one thing I was sure I didn't want.

"Grace," he says, his voice a low rumble, full of heat.

"You know my name."

"I asked your tribe brothers for it. I saw you and knew that no other female would be entering my dreams."

The heartspace knows.

"And you're Calran," I say, my voice catching in my throat a little.

"I am."

He looks pleased, as if he takes my knowledge of his name to mean I was as instantly smitten with him as he was with me.

I point to his tattoos.

"Rachel told us about a raskarran in Darran's tribe with tattoos like the Cliff Top tribe."

His hand shifts, wrapping around his forearm as if to hide the markings from view.

“Vantos told us of how those Cliff Top males attacked you. Know that I would never mean harm to another without good cause.”

“That’s what Rachel told us. Not to be afraid.”

“And are you unafraid?”

I hesitate, his brows dipping into the smallest frown as he notices. I swallow past the fear that grips my throat. I’ve known that there would be a good chance of the dreamspace forming for me ever since Liv first mentioned this plan to join the tribes together. Had time to think about how to approach it. Decided that honesty would be the best thing. So I take a breath, tell the truth.

“I’m not any more afraid of you than I would be of anyone sitting there.”

“You fear having a mate?” Calran’s voice is soft, gentle.

“Yes,” I say, my voice tremulous. I swallow again, re-exert my control over my emotions. “But it’s not something I don’t want. I like the idea of having a mate very much.”

“But ideas are safe, while reality is not.”

His words surprise me, and it must show on my face, for Calran inclines his head in acknowledgement.

“Vantos did not only speak to us of the Cliff Top tribe,” he says. “I understand that the world you are from was not a kindly place, that you have learned to be fearful of things that to us it makes little sense to fear.”

“Yes.” My voice shakes again.

Calran nods, then meets my gaze, holds it.

“My Grace, I wish for you to know that you have nothing to fear from me, but I understand that it may take time for trust to build between us. You do not need to fear my impatience or lack of understanding. I have lived many seasons knowing I would never know my linasha. Knowing you at all is the greatest gift. It is not one I would squander. I only ask that you would help me to understand your fears so that I might not trigger them.”

I hear his words. Vaguely. Part of me registers that they are sweet and swoons. But the bigger part of me is frozen in response to the first thing he said.

My Grace.

I know this is how the raskarrans refer to their mates when they don't call them linasha. How many times have I heard Shemza use the phrase 'nhi Lorna' since their mating? I always thought it was sweet, but hearing that possessive 'my' next to my own name just sends me back ten years.

*My breeder is defective.*

Calran shifts and I flinch, my body reacting instinctually, the movement happening before I have a chance to think about it, to hold the instinct in. Calran holds himself very still for a long moment, before sitting back in the chair, putting himself further away from me.

"I can see I have triggered some already."

There's no judgement, no sneer in his voice, but the drive to placate him, to beg his forgiveness, is difficult to ignore.

"Please explain to me what I have done wrong, so that I do not do it again, my Grace. I wish for you to be comfortable with me above all else."

"You haven't done anything wrong," I say. "Not really. I don't want you to feel bad for doing what comes naturally to you."

"I will feel bad only if I repeat the actions that you do not like. Until then, we are just two people from different worlds coming to an understanding."

He gives an easy smile, and it's impossible not to smile back.

"So you'd tell me if I did something to make you uncomfortable?"

"Of course," he says. "Though I think it very unlikely you could do anything to make me uncomfortable."



He grins, clearly trying to put me at ease with humour, but his words make me tense again.

“And I have said another wrong thing.” Calran ducks his head, giving me a sheepish smile. “I will say nothing further until you have explained to me.”

I wonder where to begin. True to his word, Calran says nothing as I search for a way to explain which will make sense to a guy who can't begin to comprehend the world I come from.

“You called me ‘my Grace’,” I say in the end. “I know that's how raskarrans refer to their mates, and I know you don't mean anything bad by it, but I belonged to someone once and being reminded of it is very difficult for me.”

“You had a mate before, one from your own world?” His voice is gentle, but I can see how he is holding himself back, guarding his emotions every bit as much as I'm trying to.

“No. When I say ‘belonged’, I mean he owned me. Like you own a knife or a spear. He bought me. I'm not sure you'll know what that means. You don't have currency here.”

“It is like a trade?” Calran says. “If another has a well-made knife that I desire, I might give him a pelt I have worked on in exchange.”

“Yes, like that.”

I watch the horror he feels play out on his face.

“You can trade for people in your world?”

“If you're wealthy enough, you can trade for just about anything.”

He's silent for a moment.

“Why would someone seek to own another person?”

It almost hurts how unimaginable it is to him.

“Sometimes for labour,” I say. “Having someone else around to do jobs they don't like. Cooking, cleaning, that sort of thing.” I take a steadying breath. “The man who bought me - he came from a tier, a tribe, that didn't have many of their

own women. Male children were more desired, so they would have... treatments, to ensure any child conceived was a boy. Which meant after a while, the men outnumbered the women. So the men without wives who wanted a child - someone to continue the family line - they would sometimes buy a woman from another tribe. As a breeder.”

There’s a long moment of silence as he processes this.

“Humans can seed a child with someone who is not their mate?”

“Yes.”

“And a male from another tribe traded with your tribe so he could own you? To seed his youngling in you?”

“Yes.”

“And your tribe chief allowed this?”

His outrage is palpable, and despite knowing it’s not aimed at me, I still start to shrink before I catch myself, try to force myself to stay open.

“Our tribe chiefs didn’t care about us the way Gregar cares about his tribe. The way I’m sure Darran cares for yours.”

“I cannot fathom how difficult that must have been for you.”

My throat is tight, my voice squeaking out of it as I speak my next words.

“It was over ten years ago,” I say, the instinct to minimise overriding my intention to be truthful for a moment. “I’ve been free from him longer than he owned me.”

Calran shakes his head. “Time gives us distance from a thing, but it does not make it any less difficult.”

There’s a solemn seriousness to his words, and I know he’s thinking about the sickness, the loss of all those raskarrans years ago. In a strange way, it’s reassuring to me. He won’t tell me to get over it, or that it shouldn’t bother me anymore. He knows what it is to carry a pain that probably won’t ever go away.

“It was awful,” I admit. “So you can understand why it’s difficult for me to hear you call me yours, even though I know you don’t mean it in the same way.”

“Of course, m...” He catches himself, shoots me a wry smile. “*Grace*. Forgive me for reminding you of such things.”

I shake my head. “You didn’t know, so there’s nothing to forgive.”

“And the second thing?”

I grimace. Asking Calran to adjust his language is one thing. A small ask. How will he feel about the other, much larger thing I have to ask of him.

“It’s to do with comfort,” I say, trying to work myself up to saying what I need to say.

“You are worried I would be very unhappy if you made me uncomfortable? That I might hurt you in some way for it?”

It’s a surprisingly astute guess for a guy who likely finds it incomprehensible that someone could be cruel to a female. Some of the raskarrans might have learned cruelty when the sickness came, but Gregar’s tribe didn’t, and I doubt Darran’s did either.

“Yes and no. The guy who owned me used to be violent towards me when he was unhappy. In my head, I know that you won’t do that. But my body doesn’t always listen. Sometimes I might flinch or shy away from you because of that.”

“Because it is an instinct you have trained, like a warrior.”

I like that. Like a warrior, not like a scared, weak woman.

“Yes.”

“Then I will always heed your body first, and you can tell me when I do not need to. That way, I will never do something you do not like.”

He says it like it’s entirely simple, and I wish it was.

“Thank you for being so understanding.”

“You are m... we are mates, Grace. I would do anything you ask of me.”

I wonder if he will regret making such a sweeping statement when I'm done.

*The raskarrans won't expect anything of us if we do find ourselves in the dreamspace, will they?*

Khadija was only joking when she answered ‘multiple orgasms’, taking a dig at Liv and her complete lack of shame in sharing her nighttime escapades with Gregar. But her words cut into a delicate part of me. The part of me that fears I'll never be able to desire being touched that way, sexual pleasure forever ruined for me by Simon.

*My breeder is defective.*

“I can see you are struggling to speak the words you need to, Grace,” Calran says, his voice so gentle it makes me ache.

“I, uh, it's a very hard thing I have to say. For me, and for you. So I'm sorry in advance.”

Calran doesn't say anything, just gives me space to continue.

“All those years of living with Simon - the man who bought me - they were very difficult. I was just a girl when he first bought me. I'd never taken a lover before. The only touch I've ever known was his.”

“And his was not a pleasant touch.”

“No. So, you see, I'm afraid that I can never enjoy that sort of thing. That even though I know you're kind and not at all like Simon, I'll never be able to get over what he did to me. I'll never be able to want to...”

“Mate,” Calran finishes for me.

His fists are clenched, the muscles in his forearms bunching. I sit very still but try to force myself not to tense up. To trust that his anger isn't directed at me. After a moment, he takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly, his fists uncurling as he does.

“You said you are afraid?” he says. I don’t immediately understand what he means and when I hesitate, he expands. “You said you are afraid that you cannot enjoy mating touches. When you say you are afraid, what do you mean?”

I open my mouth to speak, but nothing comes out, my brain stalling, failing to come up with an answer.

“I am asking because if you simply never wish to mate, then that is one thing. There is a simple solution to that problem. We just do not mate. We enjoy each other in other ways. But you say ‘afraid’, which could mean that mating is something you desire, and your fear is that you can never have something that you want. If that is the truth of it, then there are things we can do to solve that problem as well, but I should like to know which it is you truly mean, so we are understanding each other clearly.”

I blink. I hadn’t even thought about it that much. Calran has taken my request for thoughtful use of language and turned it back on me, and I’m surprised by the desire I feel to throw my arms around his neck and hug him. I figured that kind of thing I could work my way back to, but never imagined it would come so quickly.

“I’m afraid of disappointing you,” I say. “That you won’t want a mate who can’t give you everything.”

Calran waves a dismissive hand. “Forget about me and what I desire. I want to know the true shape of your feelings. How you felt before the dreamspace formed for us. Before you ever knew of me.”

I take a moment, give it the consideration Calran deserves. I think about Liv and her outrageous stories. I’m not sure I could ever be as adventurous as she is, even if Simon had never happened. But then I think of Shemza, and how he looks at Lorna when she comes to the healer’s hut to see him. The way his tail will graze along her legs, or his hand will trail down her arm. Nothing demanding, nothing claiming about it. Just a promise of what’s to come later, when they’re alone. I try to imagine Calran doing the same - coming to visit me at

work, giving me a heated look. Me feeling a shiver of need and excitement. It's not so difficult to picture.

And part of me hates that I'm broken, that I'll never know that kind of intimacy with someone who cares about me. Truly cares about me.

"I'm afraid that I'm missing out on an experience that should be wonderful. That I'll never be able to connect with my mate the way I should."

Calran lets my words settle for a moment.

"First," he says. "Mating is not the only way for us to connect. It is one way, yes, but not the only one. We do not need it to form a strong bond between us, lin- *Grace*. But, if you truly fear that you are being denied something wonderful by your fears, then we could work on this together. You say this male only tried to seed a youngling in you. That does not sound like he gave any consideration to your pleasure. That is not a mistake I would make."

He adds a teasing lilt to his words, but quickly grows serious again.

"If you would permit me, I would try to show you ways to enjoy mating? If I am unsuccessful, then it matters little to me. I would be happy simply to have you in my arms each night as we sleep, to wake beside you and share our hours together. I never dreamed I would be so lucky as to find a linasha after the sickness. Just to know you is greater by far than the nothing I was certain to have before you came to these trees."

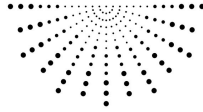
I'm so overcome with emotion at his words that I forget that he's asked me a question.

"Well?" he asks, gentle and undemanding. "Would you like to try to overcome your fears? Would you like me to do my best to teach you pleasures?"

A shiver runs down my spine at the heat in his words, and it's not entirely unpleasant.

"Okay," I say.

## CHAPTER TWO



Calran

*M*y brave linasha. Her voice cracks as she agrees to my suggestion, her fears and wants as clear in her eyes to me as their colour. She has been hurt so badly by this male who owned her, and if I had the power, I would go to him and cut him down for all he has inflicted on her. But I am here in Lina's forests and he is back in the world my Grace has come from, so I shall have to focus only on undoing the hurts he has caused.

There is an almost panicked quality to my Grace's breathing, as if she is afraid now that she has answered my question, I intend to start our lessons immediately. My cock stirs at the thought of touching her in any small way, but my Grace has been through enough this night already. She has been honest with me when it has been very difficult for her, and that is all I will ask of her this night.

"Perhaps we can start tomorrow night? If you feel you are ready then," I say.

It is as though all the bones in my Grace's body grow soft, the way she relaxes at my words. This is going to be very difficult for her, and I will have to be careful not to overstep at every stage of our journey together. I shall have to study her closely, learn the cues of her body for the moments when she is unwilling or unable to speak the truth to me. I must know her better than she knows herself, so that I might avoid ever pushing her in ways that make her uncomfortable.

“Yes, tomorrow,” she says, her voice light with relief.

“Only if you feel ready,” I remind her.

She gives me a smile, a small, tentative smile, but it is an expression of her happiness and I am glad to see it.

Grace. My linasha, my mate. She may not like to be called such, and I understand well her reasons, but it is hard not to think those words and let my chest swell with the delight of being chosen by Lina for her. I knew my heartspace could never belong to another from the moment I first saw her, yet still the idea that I could be so blessed seemed impossible. To be here in dreams with her - it is the happiest I have been since my nieces were born.

Thinking of little Mellah and Fallah aches my heartspace, as it always does. They were taken by the sickness so young, their mother Lahven with them. A more beautiful raskarran female I have never known. My brother was truly blessed to name her linasha and to have such fine younglings with her. Knowing his blessing was taken from him, knowing the loss he suffered - a great loss to me also, though my suffering was not close to Darran's - only makes me more determined to enjoy the blessing of my Grace. What shape that blessing comes in matters little to me. Only that she is happy, that I am a good mate to her, in whatever manner she decides is best for her.

And that does not include mating only, I realise. There is the question of what she will be comfortable with in the waking world. If she will welcome me into her private spaces, or if she wishes to maintain more distance until she grows comfortable with me. I should like very much to live in her hut, to spend my days and nights near to her, but ever I will defer to her wishes in this. Unless she is able to trust me in all ways, she will never be able to relax enough to enjoy my presence, never mind my touches.

“I would like to ask some more questions of you, linasha,” I say. “I promise they will not be as difficult as those I have already asked.”



“Okay.” There is apprehension in my Grace’s tone, but she nods encouragement to me.

Such a brave, brave female. My chest swells with pride in her strength. A warrior and a healer. A finer mate I could not imagine.

“I should like to know what the arrangements will be for us in the waking world. I should like to join you in your hut, but if this is something you do not feel comfortable with, then I am happy to wait until such a time that you are.”

“Oh,” my Grace says, then she grimaces. “Molly.”

“This is your youngling, yes?” I am eager to learn about the little female. I must be a good mate to my Grace, and a good father to Molly also.

“She’s not my blood, obviously,” my Grace says, discomfort flickering across her features once more.

“Blood does not always dictate family,” I say.

“I’d like her to be family,” my Grace says. “It’s been very difficult for her, being here. Leaving her home in the first place. There’s a story there, but she hasn’t shared it with me yet. She’s only just starting to trust me.”

“I would not do anything to damage that growing trust,” I say.

“I’ll have to speak to her, find out what her feelings are on things.” She grimaces again. “But whatever her feelings are, I don’t think...” She swallows, telling me her next words are difficult for her. “I don’t think I can be comfortable working on... what we agreed... while Molly is next door.”

“You desire privacy for such things,” I say. “I understand this.”

But how we will get it could be difficult. I would not want the youngling to feel she is being sent away.

“Do you think Molly would be amenable to spending some nights with her other tribe sisters?”

“Maybe, but, thinking about it, I’m not sure I want to try mating in our hut. If I wasn’t able to enjoy it, I wouldn’t want our hut to be a place we made bad memories, you know?”

She calls it ‘our hut’ and this pleases me greatly. She said she likes the idea of having a mate very much, and I am glad that she did not only say this out of some desire to placate me. That she thinks of us as sharing our lives and our spaces together.

“I understand this. Do you have a suggestion for how you would like to proceed?”

I can think of many ideas, but I would like for her to share hers with me. I do not want her agreeing to something I have said because she feels she must.

My Grace’s expression turns thoughtful, her small, blunt teeth nibbling at her bottom lip in a way that puts thoughts of the human kisses into my headspace. I wonder if this is something my Grace would be willing to teach me of, in exchange for my lessons in her pleasure. I hope so, very much.

“There’s a tradition among some of my people,” she says, “where a newly mated couple go away on a short trip. A honeymoon, it’s called. It’s a time they spend alone together. Usually away somewhere - visiting a different place to their village. Perhaps we could do something like that? A few days alone in the forest to try mating. And to get to know one another better. I think if I was comfortable with you, it would be easier to make Molly comfortable.”

This makes sense to me, and I like the idea of it very much. A few days with my Grace all to myself. If we are successful at mating or not, it will be a great pleasure to have this time alone to get to know one another. To learn the shape of her spirit. Yes, it is a very pleasing idea.

“I think this sounds good. Your chieftess would be willing for you to travel away from the village?”

“I think so,” my Grace says.

“Then this is what we shall do.”



I meet my Grace as she emerges from her hut and in the brief moment before her thoughts catch up to her feelings, she gives me a dazzling smile.

She has her youngling with her, the little female giving me a suspicious look as I approach. I incline my head to her in greeting first, placing my hand over my heartspace.

“Calran,” I say, then gesture to her.

She thinks about it for a moment, her thoughts racing behind her eyes. Yes, I shall have to work hard to win the trust of this youngling as well, I think. Both my females have been hurt in their pasts, and both will require gentle treatment. But it is a thought that invigorates me, that I might help to heal not only my Grace, but Molly also.

A daughter.

“Molly,” she says eventually, mimicking the way I placed my hand over my heartspace.

I incline my head again.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Molly. Daughter.”

I like how the word tastes in my mouth.

I turn to my Grace. Instinct drives me to reach for her, and though I am wary of pushing her beyond her comforts, I am also encouraged by the smile she gave me. So I reach a hand out towards her, slowly, giving her time to shake her head or back away. When she does not, I grip her shoulder lightly, the kind of touch any of my brothers would have given and meant nothing more than friendly encouragement by. I know the fact that the touch comes from me gives it greater weight, and I am all the more thrilled that my Grace accepts it so readily because of this.

“Good morning,” I say to her.

I do not know how many raskarran words she has learned in her time here, but she smiles at me, repeats back what I have said to her.

“Good morning.”

Her tone is soft, warm. Further encouraged, I do not remove my hand from her shoulder as we walk together towards the fire.

My brothers are keen to hear of my mating and soon surround me, firing questions at me from all sides. I know they are disappointed not to be so blessed as I am, and eager to find a mate of their own, so I do not begrudge them their interest, or their probing questions, answering as much as I can without telling anything I think my Grace would not wish for them to know. It does not satisfy them much, but my mate’s needs come first over theirs, which is something they would understand were they not so caught up in their own interests. They are not bad males - these are just strange and wondrous times for all of us.

Eager to make arrangements for this sweet moon my Grace wishes to have, I seek permission from both Shemza, to whom she is apprenticed, and Gregar her tribe chief. Both are pleased to grant it to me, delighted for my Grace and myself both, I think.

Throughout my conversations with her tribe brothers, I feel my Grace’s attention on me. Whenever I look over, catch her gaze, she smiles again, and there is happiness in that expression - growing more bright, more obvious with each smile she gives me. When we return from this sweet moon, I would have her smile like that always. I am hopeful this is a thing I can achieve.

“It is a good day,” Darran says. “A very good day.”

He has been reserved in his joy for me, and I understand this. My joy is only reminder of his own pains. I grip his arm.

“I wish that Lahven were here to celebrate this day with us. That little Mellah and Fallah could have shared some teasing words with their uncle. It is the only thing that makes my joy in this moment incomplete.”

“They wait for us in Lina’s embrace, brother,” Darran says, his voice rough. “I am glad to say I will have some new joys to

share with them when we are reunited.”

After we have eaten our morning meal, I pack a tent and a bag full of the supplies my Grace and I will need to sustain ourselves alone in the trees for a few days. I speak to Vantos, seeking advice for which direction to travel to find a good spot for our sweet moon.

“There is a place not so far from here - half a day’s walk at the pace of the females - I will explain to you the path so you might find it,” he says.

“Half a day’s walk would be a good distance,” Shemza says. “Grace is keen to be here for the birth of Sally’s youngling. Half a day as the females walk would be close enough for someone to run and fetch her back in ample time, should Sally’s birthing start.”

“Good, this place will be pleasing to my Grace then.” I give both males, my new brothers, my thanks, and they send me on my way with warm wishes for my mating.

Then it is time for us to leave. I find my Grace speaking quiet words with our youngling. I wish I could speak the human words to add my own reassurances. Then I spy the female, Sally, who speaks raskarran words so well.

“Would you be able to give a message to the youngling, Molly, for me?” I ask.

“Of course,” Sally answers with a smile.

“Please tell her that I will look after her mother well, and that I look forward to getting to know her better when we return.”

“I will,” Sally says. She touches my arm in a very raskarran gesture. “Molly has many troubles and it may be difficult for her to adjust to another change in her life. I know I don’t need to counsel patience to a raskarran, but I will anyway.”

“I am good at being patient,” I assure her.

“We will guard your daughter well while you are gone, also.”

It makes me stand taller to have this female I have only just met address Molly as such. Sally may have lived many seasons here, grown used to raskarran ways, but in its own way this is cause for hope for me. Sally has come from the same world as the other females, likely had some of the same issues. That she has surmounted them and lives a full and happy life with her mate and her younglings says to me that this is possible for my Grace and Molly also.

“You have my sincerest thanks for this,” I say.

“Enjoy your time with your linasha,” Sally says. “Grace is a kind female, much concerned with looking after others. I am very pleased that she has someone to look after her now.”

The females wave to their sister as we leave, taking our first steps into the forest together. I am glad that they care so deeply for my Grace, but I confess, I am most pleased when the trees close in behind us and we are separated from the tribe. Alone.

I know there is a bounce in my step as I walk, my pleasure in being here under the trees with my linasha filling my body with lightness. Feeling daring, I put an arm about her shoulder, and when she does not protest, I draw her close to me so that we might walk together. Her pace is slow, and I can enjoy all the sensations of her body touching mine as we go, the scent of her filling my nose, without fearing distraction. I am sure to look down at her every so often, to check that she is still happy, still comfortable, and each time I am greeted by one of her smiles, which only lifts me further.

We walk until it is time to have our midday meal. Our path follows a small stream and there are many adequate places to stop for a meal break. I wait until we come across one with a djenti bush, so my Grace might collect some berries to treat any aches she may have. Shemza warned me that the females are not much used to walking long distances and need to build up their resilience after their mistreatment by their previous tribe.

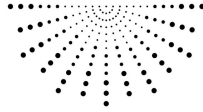
My Grace takes a seat beside the stream, refilling her canteen and drinking from it in long, thirsty gulps. It is not so

hot today, the big rains drawing ever closer, but she is pink in the cheeks from exertion or the temperature. I squat beside her, pointing to her feet then making the 'good' gesture that Shemza taught me before we left, raising my brows to make it a question. My Grace nods, but I gesture to the djenti bush in case she might need it all the same.

I take out two of the meal bars that I have packed. When we make our camp, I will check the area for any hunting. I am a warrior, and with the rains so close, the hunting will not be easy. But perhaps Lina will smile on me and grant us a juicy frenelle to enjoy. If not, I have supplies enough to last us, it will just not be such enjoyable fare.

My Grace nibbles on the meal bar I hand her. Her shoulders look loose and relaxed, which I take to be a good sign of her comfort. I eat my own food, and the salt of the meal bar has never tasted better than it does eaten now beside my linasha.

## CHAPTER THREE



Grace

We don't walk that much further after our lunch break. Another hour or two, perhaps. Certainly before my feet start to really ache, Calran turns to me, gesturing at the space around us, a question in his eyes.

I look at the clearing we've stopped in. It's large enough to set the tent and build a decent fire with room to spare. The stream we've been following most of the way here cuts through the middle of it, giving us access to fresh water, but isn't too wide to easily step over, meaning we can get to the other bank. There, the ground slopes upwards, becomes rocky. There are several cave openings, most too small for even a human like me to crawl inside, but the largest is big enough that Calran wouldn't have to duck much to step through. The opening is steaming slightly, like the hot springs do back at the village, and I wonder if there is hot water somewhere inside.

All in all, it's a perfect spot and I smile my approval to Calran, grateful that he's taken the time to think through the details of this impromptu getaway. That he's doing everything in his power to make it a success.

It just leaves me to follow through on my side of the bargain.

I'm nervous about it, but it's not a consuming sort of feeling. I can ignore it well enough as I look for stones to contain the fire, while Calran makes the tent. Even when he



pulls several furs out of his pack and steps inside to arrange them, I only have to take a couple of steadying breaths.

He's not going to expect me to do anything this first day, I remind myself. He's a good person. He'll wait until we're sleeping, until we can speak.

By the time Calran is satisfied with the tent, I'm finished with the circle of stones, starting to layer up leaves and twigs to get the fire started. Calran pulls a pair of flints from his belt, striking them until something catches, and before long we have a merry little fire burning. It's not cold, but the warmth from the flames soothes my aching feet, so I take off my shoes, put my feet close to the fire. Calran smiles at me, but then hands me a small pouch of djenti berries he must have collected at lunch time. I collected some, too. The healer in me couldn't pass on the opportunity. But I take his with a grateful smile and crush a few into my canteen, drinking deep.

Then we're done with the jobs we needed to do, and nothing but time and each other's company stretches out ahead of us. The nervous feeling expands in my chest, harder to ignore with nothing else to distract me, and I itch at it, as if I could scratch the fear out of me. When that doesn't work, I turn to my pack, take out my cream.

Calran gives me a curious look as I open the lid, drawing it to my nose and breathing in the floral scent of this batch. I gesture for him to come and sit beside me, holding the cream pot up for him to smell. He takes a deep breath and immediately sneezes, his much more sensitive raskarran nose struggling with the scent. He chuckles, then takes the pot again, breathing less deeply this time. He nods, but still looks confused as he hands the pot back to me. I smile, setting the pot down between us, then scooping out a little of the cream to massage into my hands.

Already, after just a couple of weeks of this treatment, my hands are less chapped, less raw. They'd been getting better since leaving my medic post after the lottery win, but the people who processed us, trained us for long haul space travel, who travelled with us - none of them were much concerned for

our comfort. Our health, to a certain extent, but something as inconsequential as sore, tight skin didn't factor.

But years of abrasion and irritation thanks to the carbolic acid spray we used to disinfect our equipment in the medic centre back home was never going to heal quickly. The sores went, but the tightness, the sensitivity remained. Shemza showed me the ingredients to create a moisturising cream to help it, and I've been perfecting the recipe - and the accompanying scent - ever since.

I smooth the cream over the backs of my hands first, then work it into the gaps between my fingers, round to my palms before rubbing the entirety of my hands together until it's soaked in. Calran watches my hands as though they are the most fascinating thing he's ever seen, then gestures to the pot and to himself, seeking my permission to take some. I nudge the pot closer to him, and he dips in two big fingers, before beginning to massage the cream into his skin.

I watch him as he does it, letting my eyes linger on the play of his arm muscles beneath his tattooed skin. Like Rachel, the first sight of those tattoos struck a fear into me, but it lasted only long enough for me to have a word with myself, remember what Rachel said about Calran being kind. Now, I can see the appeal of them, why the warriors of the Cliff Top tribe might choose to mark their skin this way. The dark brown, almost black colour of the ink works perfectly with the green tone of his skin, the markings intricate and delicate where they wind round his wrists, his forearms, up to his shoulders.

I don't know how tattoos work in the human world, never mind the raskarran one, but I find myself curious enough to make a note to ask him.

When he's done, he lifts his hands to his nose, breathing in slowly. I watch his expression, allowing myself to feel amused at his antics. He's not Simon, he isn't going to lose his temper if he catches me smirking at him. I need to relax, trust in him. If I do it in these small moments, then it will be easier in the bigger ones.

Calran gives a nod of approval, although there's a hint of humour sparkling in his eyes. Then his expression shifts, and he holds out a hand towards me. I place my hand over his, and he grips it lightly, drawing it up to his nose. This time when he breathes in, his eyes close, a look of pleasure crossing his face. The sight of it makes something in my chest flutter, and I can't decide if it's fear or something else. Something long buried rising to the surface.

A bit of both, perhaps.

When Calran opens his eyes, he looks directly at me, catching my gaze and holding it. He studies me, reading my reaction to his touch. And I don't mind it, the touch on its own. It feels intimate, but not overwhelming. But with his eyes on me like that, the sense that he's watching, judging, I find I can't help but shy away from him.

I don't like that I react that way, but there it is.

Calran releases my hand, smiling at me to let me know it's fine, he doesn't mind. Of course, that only makes me feel more conflicted about it. He's being so kind, so patient. I feel like I should be able to give him more of myself already. But the more I start thinking about what I 'should' do, the more the muscles in my back and shoulders start to tighten, and the further away the possibility of ever being normal around him feels.

I need to get out of my own head.

So I do that the only way I know how - I forage for medicines.

There's no djenti bush in this little clearing, but I still have my supply from earlier, so that's no problem. I start working my way round the clearing from one edge of the stream, going in a clockwise circle round the edges of the trees, then finish by working my way down the stream. The herbs and roots Shemza uses for healing tend to grow out of the shade of the trees, away from their thirsty roots that suck up all the rainwater. The best place to find healing plants is along a water source, but the stream is only small, its banks not that large, so there isn't much here. I find a very small nesta plant -

too small to harvest anything from it yet - and some geberren roots by the stream. I dig those out with my knife, as it's always useful to have a supply, and the plant grows fast, spreading quickly and taking over whatever other vegetation there is around it. You never have to feel bad about digging up geberren root - it does the other plant life a favour.

Calran also busies himself digging through his pack. He pulls out some bits of rope and I recognise the snare traps the hunters use to catch smaller prey. He catches my attention, indicating to the snares, before heading out into the trees to set them. The hunting has slowed down a lot since the frantic few days after we arrived at Gregar's village - when the focus was on trying to ensure there would be enough food to keep an extra fifteen mouths fed - and not just because the supply stores are getting full to bursting. With the rains approaching, a lot of the animals have moved on to other places, the pickings for the hunters rather slim. So I doubt Calran's traps are going to succeed, but I'm grateful he's brought them with us. It gives him something to do that isn't about me. It gives me a moment alone to gather myself.

As I look around at the clearing, listening to the bubbling of the stream running over rocks, the sounds of the wind through the trees, I remember those first few days on the beach. Trying to care for Lorna, feeling pretty certain she was going to die no matter what I did. Growing thinner and hungrier with every passing day, always looking at the trees at the edge of the beach with fear. The forest looked so forbidding then. It's still frightening now. Still home to the merka beasts, with their sharp claws and vicious lashes. But I'm not afraid the way I was back then. It's a healthy fear, respect more so than terror. And if my outlook on the forest can change so drastically, then maybe my outlook on other things can as well.

When Calran returns, we make dinner together. It's early to be eating, but the walk has given me an appetite and I think we're both eager to go to sleep for the night. The lack of shared language between us makes everything more difficult, more awkward. I'm awkward enough when I have words. I'm terrible without them.

But Calran is all patience as he mimes things to me, asking me questions with his hands and his expression. I try to communicate as clearly as he does, speaking words with my body, but I'm not a natural emoter. Too many years of hiding my true feelings, stopping them from ever appearing on my face.

Then the light starts fading, the night rolling in. I look up at the sky overhead, the clouds hiding the stars and moons from view. The air cools off quickly, my skin prickling with gooseflesh. Not something that happens often here in the balmy raskarran forest. Calran notices me trying to rub some warmth into my arms and inclines his head towards the tent.

My heart stutters, fear rising in me even though he's given me no reason to mistrust him. The tent isn't large, so even if we're sleeping in separate furs, we're going to be pressed quite close together, and half of me wants to lean into that, to burrow into his warmth and enjoy the feeling of security that I'm sure his arm around me would provide. But the other half keeps continuing on to what could happen after that. If his hand wanders somewhere I don't want it to.

But I promised him I would try. Not just for him. For me. I don't want to be afraid of something that could be wonderful between us. I want to give myself a chance to have a mate in every sense. That starts with sleeping in our tent tonight.

I get up, packing away the few things we have out into our bags, before Calran tucks them inside one of the smaller caves, out of the way and protected from the elements. He gestures for me to go ahead of him, and when I hesitate, he touches a hand to my shoulder again. Gives it a gentle squeeze. I take a steadying breath, then head inside, ducking under the low doorway, the fabric falling closed once Calran steps in behind me.

There are two separate piles of furs, made up as far from each other as it's possible to get them in the small space of the tent. Calran gives me an enquiring look and I smile at him, grateful for his consideration. I take off my boots, my walking socks, then shimmy out of my leggings. My nightclothes are on the pile of furs, and I turn my back to Calran before pulling

off my top and changing into them. He doesn't pay me any attention as I do this, as if he can sense how high the anxiety has ridden in me. As if he knows the weight of his gaze would be enough to tip me over the edge into panic.

When I'm dressed, I turn back to him, see he is already settling down into his own furs. He smiles at me, then closes his eyes, his breathing quickly going slow and even. I lie back, tucking my furs around me, and try to relax enough to drift off.



"I hope the walk was not too much for you," Calran says as I sit up in the dream tent - so similar to the one we're actually in, but for the bed at the centre of it.

Calran is once again sat in a chair at the end of the bed, but he stands as he speaks, then gestures to the bed.

"I would lie next to you, if you would permit it?"

My mouth feels dry, but I force myself to nod.

Trust. Building it means taking some chances.

"The walk was fine," I say, as his weight makes the bedding dip before he shifts so he is lying down. "It's nice to get out, see more of the forest."

"And we have the privacy you desired."

"Yes."

"Would you lie down also? I swear to you I will not touch you without asking first."

I'm jittery as I shift, lying back against the bedding. I want to be on my feet, pacing round. Anything to work off this nervous energy. But I hold it in, try to ignore it.

"I have given much thought to this bargain of ours, Grace," he says, and I appreciate that he drops the 'my'. "As we have walked, I have been doing a lot of thinking about you, and how you might like to be shown pleasures."

"That must have been distracting."

He grins at my attempt at a joke. “I got us to this place without mishap. That was my only requirement for today. That left much space in my awareness for other things.”

His eyes rake over my body as he says it, heat creeping into his tone. Simon never looked at me like that, and I’m not sure how to feel about it. It telegraphs Calran’s desire clearly, the potency of it, and while it’s nice that he looks at me and sees something desirable, it only makes me more skittish, more uncomfortable.

“I wish to ask you some more questions. Questions that may be uncomfortable, and for that I am sorry, but I think they are important.”

“Okay, ask me whatever you need.”

I should always be willing to give him honesty, I think, no matter how uncomfortable it gets.

“This Simon, he wished to seed a child in you, yes? I imagine he was not much concerned with other ways of mating. Ways that are not required for the seeding of a child?”

I swallow down my discomfort. “I’m... not really familiar with different ways of mating.”

“He put his cock inside you, spilled his seed?” Calran looks deeply uncomfortable to say it, as if the thought of what Simon did to me cuts at him as much as it does at me. “For raskarrans, seeding can only occur when the mating node is active, but I understand it is different for humans? You do not have mating nodes. Is seeding something a human can do any time?”

“Yes. And yes, that’s what he would do. Most nights.”

A flash of his body, hot and sweaty over mine, fills my mind. The grunting sounds he used to make. The mercy of it was it never lasted very long, but any length of time was too much, really.

“So he would never touch you? Never taste you? Mating is not only done with a cock, Grace. There are many different ways that I would like to please you.”

Something flickers low in my belly, the barest spark of heat. Hardly an inferno, but given that I've never felt even that much desire before, I take it to be a promising sign.

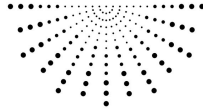
"He didn't touch me, no." Definitely didn't taste. He wouldn't even kiss me.

Calran nods, as though this satisfies him.

"Then perhaps that is where we should start," he says, a smile spreading slowly across his lips.



## CHAPTER FOUR



Calran

“S-start?” my Grace stammers. “Now?”

I shake my head. We are lying next to each other and she is stiff as a good climbing branch. She would not yield to my touch as tight as she is holding herself just for being near me.

“I mean when you are ready,” I say. “Right now, I am content to lie beside you. I told you I would not touch you without asking, so you do not need to fear that I will be overcome by need and grab you.”

I give her a quick grin so that she can be sure I am only teasing. Amusement shapes her full lips, and I am again reminded of kisses.

“Did that male give you kisses?” I ask.

Grace shakes her head. “I don’t think he much liked to touch me. I was lesser than him, lower. I wasn’t... worthy of him. He did what he considered necessary, nothing more.”

I hate that she has been treated so badly, but in its way, this gives me an approach to take. If he has only thought of seeding young in her, then we will think of everything else. I will touch and taste and stroke and lick until she is begging me to fill her. I am sure I can make her beg if she gives me a chance to try, and she has been so very brave so far. I grow more confident that a chance will come, if only I continue to

be careful, slow in my approach. Always considerate of her fears.

And when she surrenders to me, it will be the sweetest thing I could ever know.

“Before we consider touches, I think it is important that you get accustomed to my nearness. My closeness makes you tense, I know. I would have my closeness give you comfort, make you feel safe.”

I do not expect her to respond to this. We are already in a position to do it, after all, me lying so close to her on this bed. When beds must be a difficult thing for her to consider sharing. It is enough for me that she has accepted this much, but my Grace surprises me again with her bravery.

“Perhaps you could put your arm around me?” she says, her voice shy.

“I would like that very much.”

She shuffles closer to me, lifting herself up so that I can slide an arm beneath her. I draw her close to me, her head resting against my chest, her body tucked into my side. She is tense, almost trembling in my arms, but she does not freeze, and she does not try to wriggle away from me, instead breathing slowly in and out until she settles, her body relaxing at last.

“This is okay for you?” I ask, trailing my hand down her arm.

She moves her head then makes a small laughing sound.

“Yes, it’s fine. It’s nice. You’re so warm.”

“And you are so small. You are lucky to have mated to me, Grace. I think you would be very cold during the long rainy nights without my heat to warm you.”

I keep my voice light, teasing, and I am rewarded with a chuckle.

“Will you be inviting all the other unmated females to share your warmth, out of concern for their wellbeing?”

I laugh. “Would you think me cruel and callous if I did not?”

“Hmm, no. I don’t think I’d like to share you. Does that make me selfish?”

“If it does, I like it very much.”

I raise a hand, stroking it through her curly hair. It is so unusual, so unlike any raskarran female I ever saw. I love the way it bounces when she moves, the shape it forms around her face. None of the other human females have hair like this, and so I think my Grace must be a rare beauty among her people.

“Tell me something of yourself,” I say, the urge to know more of her filling my chest.

“I’ve told you a lot of it already.”

“You have told me the bad things that I need to know, and I am grateful for it, but the bad things that have happened to you are not the whole of you, Grace. What do you dream of in your future? What makes your heartspace sing? What is your most cherished memory?”

My Grace remains silent for a moment, then, in a small voice, asks, “Would you tell me one of yours?”

“Of course,” I answer, though I wonder at her reluctance. Whether the cause of it is perhaps that she does not have so many cherished memories. We will make plenty, I want to tell her, but instead, I speak of my own. “My brother’s linasha, Lahven, was considered by many to be the most beautiful of the females in any of the nearby tribes. Certainly she had as fine a face as I have ever seen until I saw yours. My brother is ten seasons my senior, and so I was young when he mated, not yet a male full grown. Yet I was grown enough to feel a pang of jealousy, that my brother was so lucky to be blessed with Lahven for his mate. Of course, it was a foolish feeling. But young males are often fools.

“I forgot any jealousy that might have lingered the night that Lahven brought my niece Mellah into the world, though. She laboured through the day and late into the evening, my brother pacing from one side of the village to the other as he

waited for his youngling to be born. She was such a pretty little thing, Mellah. Tiny little nose and big, wide eyes, her tail only as long as my finger. But when Lahven placed her in my arms, that tiny little creature captured my heartspace fully. There is an ache in my heartspace that will never fully heal that I did not get to see my nieces grow, take mates and have younglings of their own, but holding little Mellah, and little Fallah who came after, for the first time remains one of my most cherished memories.”

“I’m so sorry you lost them,” my Grace says, and there are tears welling in her eyes as she looks at me.

“The sickness was a cruel thing. It took many. My sufferings are less than my brother’s, and now I have you as a balm to those hurts. I only hope my brother can find joy in my joys, as I once did with his. I would see him truly happy again, but I think perhaps it is not possible. If he could get close to such happiness, that would satisfy me.”

“Your family is very important to you.”

“Yes. And you are my family now. You and Molly both.” I consider what I know of the females, that they are come here from another world. Stranded, their old tribe not willing to come for them. “Did you leave family behind when you came here?”

“No,” Grace says, with a short laugh that holds no amusement. “No, Mercenia didn’t make it easy for people in the lower tiers, tribes, to have family. My parents both died young while I was Simon’s possession. I didn’t get to see them in the end, but I’m almost glad of that.”

“It is not a pleasant thing to see your loved ones grown so weak before their time,” I say, remembering Lahven in the end, all her beauty robbed from her by the sickness.

Grace pushes herself up out of my arms, turning so she can look at me, one arm braced on my chest.

“This conversation has taken a bit of a morbid turn,” she says, her lips curling up a little at the edges. “I didn’t mean to bring the mood down.”

“Do not apologise for speaking the truth of your experiences to me. I am your mate. I am here to share in your hardships and your hurts, just as I would hope you would share in mine.”

Her eyes are soft, her shoulders relaxed, her body growing comfortable against mine, despite our conversation. I raise a hand to her cheek, brush my fingers across her skin. Her lips part, a soft exhale escaping them, and I wonder if it is wise to take a chance. Decide that I am going to, if it is wise or not.

“Would you show me human kisses?”

My Grace’s cheeks burn bright red, and she drops her gaze from mine, but she does not shy away from me.

“I’ve never done it before,” she says. “I don’t know if I’ll be any good at it.”

“I have never done it before, either. I have nothing to compare your skill to.”

She catches my eye briefly, a flash of a grin appearing on her lips.

“Well, then, I guess it won’t matter.”

She leans forward, angling herself so she is higher up on my body, bringing our faces into alignment. I wait, holding myself still, not wanting to startle her. Slowly, a hair’s width at a time, she edges closer to me. As her breath tickles over my skin, she closes her eyes. I would close mine also, but I am enraptured by the sight of her coming towards me, her expression empty of any fear or tension, her lips slightly parted.

Then her lips press against mine, and I understand why her eyes close. It is so that nothing else might distract from the sensation of lips touching lips. Soft, gentle caresses of her mouth over mine have my cock instantly hard in my leathers, a growl rising in my chest as my desire to crush her to me threatens to overwhelm my senses. But I force myself to stay mostly still, only bringing my hands up to hold her, one against the small of her back, the other holding her arm where it is pressed to my chest.

For the first few moments, my Grace's kisses are light, fleeting, as if she is as concerned about my limits as I am about hers. I rumble my pleasure in her attentions deep in my chest, and I think it must encourage her, for the next kiss she gives me is firmer, more exploratory, her lips parting mine, our mouths sliding together. I groan, my hands tightening on her body, but I do not move them. No matter how much I want to, I will not do anything without her clear invitation.

Then her tongue sweeps across my bottom lip, licking at me, and I am lost. I will not move my hands, but my tongue is powerless not to tangle with hers, and I lick deep into her mouth, tasting her. Grace's arms slide around my neck, and she presses closer to me, the kiss growing deeper, more urgent. My cock throbs with need, but it will have to wait. That my Grace is already giving me this is a gift I will not squander by trying to take more.

Abruptly, she pulls back from me, her lips swollen, her eyes dazed in a way that makes pride thrum in my chest.

“Could you... would you put your hands in my hair?”

I grin, making her blush once more, but she doesn't shy from her request.

“I will do whatever you ask of me, Grace, with pleasure.”

I thread my fingers through her hair. It is softer than I expect, sliding easily over my skin. I cup the back of her head, drawing her back to me, claiming her lips once more. And it is amazing how different the feeling of the kiss is now with even this small shift. It grows faster, greedier, the pleasure of the touch rising with our hunger for each other. I do not want the kiss to stop, but I know if I do not, I will soon become unable to, so, after a long, long moment, I gentle the kiss down, breaking apart from my Grace. Giving us both room to catch our breath.

“I like these kisses very much,” I say, brushing her hair back from her face. “I hope you will give me many more in the future.”

Her cheeks are stained pink now, the colour not diminishing.

“That sounds good to me.”

“I am glad to hear it.”

“Thank you for stopping.”

I shake my head. “You should not thank me, truly. I am a selfish male. All I can think is how the anticipation of more is going to make it all the sweeter.”



It is early when we wake, so I look to my Grace and hold up the pelts around me, giving her a questioning look. She bites on her bottom lip, reminding me of all the kisses we have shared, but then she shuffles to my side, tucking herself against me. We will sleep like this from now on, I think with pleasure, as we doze in each other's arms. She has come to trust me enough for this.

She seems more nervous here in the waking world, though, twitching at my every movement. At first I try to hold still, but then I think it might be better to be natural, to give her a chance to grow accustomed to the shifts of my body. To experience them and know they do not mean anything bad for her. I stroke my fingers through her hair, press my lips gently to her forehead, and after a while, she relaxes. I could easily spend all day like this with her in my arms, but I am conscious that my Grace needs feeding, and selfishly, I am eager to try more things with her this day.

After a light breakfast, I take my Grace's hand and help her step over the stream, heading for the caves. They are not large, according to Vantos, but the biggest of them contains a hot pool just big enough for getting cleaned in. The females enjoy the hot water, apparently, and I am sure my Grace would like to clean up after our walk yesterday.

I duck inside the entrance of the largest cave, the heat of the air inside hitting my face. My Grace does not have to duck, her smaller stature an advantage in this enclosed space. But it is clear that she does not appreciate the closeness, her hand

gripping mine tight, tension radiating from her. Once we're fully inside, I turn to her, catching her face in my hands and pressing our foreheads together, smiling at her.

"You are doing so well," I tell her, and though I am unsure how many of my words make sense to her, I hope at least my gentle tone reassures her.

She moves so her face is pressed to my chest, breathing in my scent as if to remind herself who she is with, that it is not the one who hurt her so many times. I wait until she draws back from me before gesturing ahead of us. She nods, stepping in front of me to lead the way, giving me an enticing view of her backside as she goes. No tail. It will be some time, I think, before I grow used to the absence.

There is not far to travel inside the cave, the ceiling sloping downwards rapidly towards the back where a small pool of hot water has gathered. I duck ahead of my Grace, testing the heat of the water with my fingers. The hot pools are a blessing from Lina, but sometimes they are too hot. I am conscious of my linasha's delicate skin.

The water is fine, though, the perfect temperature for bathing. I grin at my Grace, before pulling my top off over my head. My hands are on the ties to my leathers before I notice that she has gone completely still, her eyes wide with panic.

Immediately, I raise my hands away from my groin, taking a slow step towards her. I give her plenty of room to step back away from me if she so desires, but instead she gives me a wild sort of look - helpless and frightened.

"I am a fool," I say, letting my shame and sorrow ring in my voice. "I thought only of the comfort of getting clean. I did not think how it would appear to you."

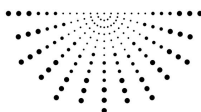
My Grace closes her eyes for a long moment, forcing herself to breathe slow and steady. Counting the breath in and out. Then she holds up a hand to me, gesturing for me to stay where I am, stop, wait, I am unsure. I hold still as she turns and heads back out of the cave, my heartspace hammering in my chest as I hope that I have not caused my linasha a great



hurt that I will not be able to heal until we sleep once more this evening.

Then my Grace reappears. She looks as though she has taken a moment to shore herself up, to conceal her emotions inside of herself. It makes my heartspace drop, and apologies line up on my tongue that I am unsure if she will understand. I would give them to her anyway, but before I can speak a single word, my Grace holds out a clenched fist towards me, unfurls her fingers to reveal the geberren root she holds.

## CHAPTER FIVE



Grace

Knowing what I do of raskarrans and their attitude to nudity, I'm almost certain getting clean is all Calran had in mind when he brought me into this cave. I've seen plenty of naked raskarrans since arriving in the village - enough that I shouldn't have reacted the way I did to a bare chest.

But with Calran everything feels automatically more charged, and sometimes that's a good feeling - a heat settling low in my belly that makes me feel warm and good and like being brave. Sometimes, though, my instincts shut my mind off before I have the chance to remind myself that this is Calran and I'm safe with him. That getting naked doesn't automatically mean sex will follow.

My hand trembles as I hold out the geberren root I collected earlier to him - the only signal I can think of to show that I do want to get clean. That I want to push myself to get clean with him.

It's as good a way as any to get used to his naked body, just as I've done with everyone else.

Calran's hand closes over the top of mine, the other coming to cup my hand from underneath. Encased in his warmth and strength, the trembling in my hand finally starts to subside. His expression as he looks at me is full of sorrow and apology. I'm grateful for his empathy, how quickly he understood where my reaction came from.

That there's no indication at all that he took it personally.

He releases my hands, then heads to the edge of the water, dropping down to sit on the floor. He rolls up his trousers until they're above his knees, putting his feet in the water. He looks at me, gesturing to the space between his legs. My heart pounds, and I think it's only half panic. I try to listen to the other half - the part of me that tingles with something that might be anticipation.

I set the geberren root down beside him, then reach for the ties on my trousers. My hands are trembling again, and I fumble the knot a couple of times before finally getting it undone, lowering my trousers to the floor and stepping out of them. My panties I leave in place, raising my hands to the hem of my top. Discomfort rises in me, but I push it down, try to work through it. Lift the top over my head.

I hear Calran's intake of breath while the fabric is still over my head, blocking my view. I take my time setting the top down on the floor with my trousers, folding it neatly to buy myself a moment to gather my courage, then turn to him, meeting his gaze.

Heat, liquid and golden pouring out of his eyes and into me. My skin prickles all over, blood rushing to my cheeks, my chest, a low, throbbing pulse starting up in that place between my thighs. I don't know how a look can make me feel so much, but it does, and I let all those feelings settle, really experience them for a moment. Feel the racing of my heart in my chest and the way my breath catches in my lungs. So similar to fear. It makes it harder to figure out where the fear ends and the anticipation begins, but the more I listen, the more I sit with the feelings, the more I realise that I'm not afraid.

Not really.

I step into the water, sitting down when the bottom starts to slope down sharply. Like the hot springs near the village, it doesn't go particularly deep - just enough that the water covers my chest when I sit. I shuffle over to Calran, meeting the

liquid heat of his gaze one last time before turning around, settling in place between his thighs.

For a long moment, he doesn't move. Long enough for me to realise the ache in my skin is need. That I want to feel his hands on me.

Then, with absolute gentleness, a hand settles on my shoulder.

He's touched me here before. A claiming touch, but a safe one. Easy enough for me to duck out of it, and not coming close to intimate. Only, it feels very intimate now, his hand on my bare skin, so close to other bare places. His thumb traces a path along the edges of my shoulder blade, running up from the bottom, just a little pressure. When he reaches the top of my shoulder, he moves it back down, starts again, increasing the pressure a little. The muscles underneath click and crunch where he finds knots, and when he goes over them again, he presses a little harder.

Then his hand moves away. I hear the sluice of water a moment before he drips it over my back, the heat of it sinking into those tense, knotted muscles. When his hands return to my skin, he begins to knead my shoulders in earnest, chasing out every little bundle of tension he finds until I'm liquid beneath his hands, so relaxed and content, I feel almost sleepy.

His fingers trace along my neck, the touch sending a pleasant shiver through me. I swallow, the pulsing between my thighs rising again. I might not be a doctor, but I do have some understanding of how the body works - the various fibres and vessels that lie underneath the skin. How the spinal cord is the central point of the nervous system - all messages to and from the various parts of the body travelling through it. But it seems to me like every time Calran touches me, he reroutes all those pathways, bypasses the spine entirely, the heat of his fingers travelling straight from wherever he touches me to my core. When his thumb passes over a particularly sensitive spot close to my jaw, a gasp escapes me.

Calran stills, his body tensing around me. Those big thighs of his seem to vibrate either side of my head, but he doesn't

move, except to circle that spot on my neck with his thumb again. The next sound that touch coaxes out of me is a whimper. A sound I'm quite sure I've never made before.

His words from last night come back to me.

*There are many different ways that I would like to please you.*

The jittery feeling fills my body again, but like before, I try just to feel it. To give it space but not give in to it. This is Calran with his hand on my neck. Calran who has been gentle and patient so far. Whose kisses make my soul light up. I promised I would try other things with him, and with his hand on my neck, heat throbbing at my core, it's not difficult to feel curious about what those other things might be.

Touching. Tasting.

Calran's thumb circles the sensitive spot on my neck once more, before moving down, brushing past my collar bone. He pauses a moment, as if waiting for me to protest, to freeze up, and when I don't, he trails his hand lower, lower, until his fingers brush over the stiff peak of my nipple.

It's like a jolt of electricity arcs through me. My body arches into the touch, pressing my breast into his hand. Calran rumbles approval, and that sound only intensifies the sensation as he pinches my nipple, rolling it between his thumb and forefinger.

My next intake of breath shudders in my lungs as his hand strokes across my chest, the other coming to join it, cupping, squeezing, pinching in all the right ways. I never knew any part of my body could feel so much sensation, that I was capable of being driven so high so quickly. I'm in danger of melting into a puddle at his feet.

Then he's gone, his feet pulling out of the water. I feel his absence like a chill, but it doesn't last long, his body sliding back into the pool behind me. This time, his thighs wrap around my thighs, his chest pressed to my back as he envelops me, his mouth coming to tease at the same spot on my neck his thumb was just exploring. In the heat of the water, his body

shouldn't feel warm, but everywhere his skin touches mine is molten.

Especially where his cock is pressed against my back.

I expect my mind to throw me back to the many nights of Simon, but before the memories can take hold, they're derailed by Calran's hands coming round to cup my breasts once again. My head rolls back, coming to rest on his shoulder at the pleasure of his ministrations, my legs spreading naturally, the pulsing between my thighs shifting to an ache, an emptiness. For the first time, I start to understand what it is to want something there, something filling it. So when Calran's hand leaves my breast, questing downwards, dipping beneath my panties to brush over the curls of my sex, all I can do is whimper with need, the delicious rightness of his touch drowning out any lingering fear.

"Grace." He speaks my name against my neck, his breath tickling over my sensitised skin.

Then his fingers slide downwards, cupping my sex before starting to explore. Even lost in the pleasure of his previous touches as I am, part of me tenses, waiting for the discomfort, the clumsy prodding to start. Calran makes a purring sound, his chest vibrating with it, his lips peppering little kisses against my neck, my shoulder until my legs fall wide open again, my muscles relaxing into his touches once more.

"Grace," he murmurs again, his teeth grazing over the point where my shoulder meets my neck.

His fingers brush over my clit, and I nearly jump out of his arms at the bolt of pleasure it gives me. Calran's arm comes across me, holding me tight to him as his other hand probes my clit, touching it in different ways, varying the pressure and the movement until he finds a combination that has me squirming against him. I can feel the hot bar of his cock at my back, even through the heat of the water, and I should be afraid. Should be worried that any moment now, he'll flip me so I'm underneath him, and this will all become exactly as it was with Simon. Painful, awkward and uncomfortable, my body incapable of doing any of the things required of it.

But before my thoughts can start to spiral too far downwards, Calran nips at my shoulder again. I cry out at the contrast between that sharp little pain and the intense pleasure building between my legs. The emptiness of my core feels vast and distracting, keeping me from the bliss that I'm so close to reaching. But as if he can read my need in the taste of my skin, Calran glides his hand further down, his finger probing at my entrance.

I tense, despite that sensation of needing to be filled. Every time anything has gone near my core, it's only meant pain, humiliation, for me, and it's difficult to let go of that. I'm thrown back into the memories of Simon's body on top of, inside of mine. The way his smell would linger on my skin afterwards. The hollow feeling in my belly that grew a little larger for every night that passed.

Panic bubbles up my throat. The sensations Calran coaxed out of me vanish, the only heat remaining that of the water around us. I want to wrench myself away from him, to run and hide.

Defective. That's all I am.

It's all I ever will be.

*My breeder is defective.*

But before I can go anywhere, Calran's hand goes to my head, stroking through my hair. He makes a gentle sound, a low sort of rumbling in his chest, different from the purring sound he made before. I feel more than hear the rumbling as he draws me against him. His cock is still hard against my back, but the tenor of how he's holding me has changed entirely, and the words he whispers in my ear are soothing, calming, meaning clear from their tone even if I can't understand him.

For a long time, he just holds me. Then, as my trembling starts to subside, he stands, lifting me up into his arms and carrying me out of the cave. He doesn't stop to collect our clothing, just strides across the clearing completely naked. And I know there isn't anyone around, that none of the raskarrans would be affected by such a display, but I'm not so

integrated into raskarran culture that I don't cringe at the thought of my body bared for just anyone to see.

But we're not exposed for long. Calran takes me straight to our tent, lying me back in the furs and wrapping them around me. He lies by my side, arms cradling me against his chest, but he remains on top of the furs, using them as a layer, a barrier between us. I wonder how he always knows exactly what to do to make me feel better, because it's perfect. It takes away a level of intimacy without removing our closeness altogether. I want him close as much as part of me doesn't. That he seems to understand that contradiction without me having to explain it puts a sweet sort of aching sensation in my chest.

"Thank you," I say to him, my voice shaky. "Maha shun."

"Shun flanas vo'shaskan," Calran says, pressing a gentle, undemanding kiss to my temple.

That kiss, the tone in his voice. They make a tension I was holding melt out of me. The fear that he would change his mind, that he wouldn't want to give me time to adjust to all of this anymore, loosens its grip on my heart. It leaves me feeling exhausted, spent, my eyes growing heavy despite the fact that the day has barely got started.

I go to sit up, to shake off my sudden fatigue and do... something. Get dressed. Look for medicines. Fill my time with something to keep the troublesome thoughts away.

But Calran just makes the low rumbling noise again, drawing me back down into the furs. He strokes his hand over and through my hair again, and the sensation is so pleasant, so relaxing. It's not long before I give in. Let myself drift.



"I shouldn't be this tired," I say to Calran as the dreamspace forms around us.

We're in exactly the same configuration as we were in the real world, the furs bundled round me, his arm over the top of them, only I'm also dressed, and so is he, our clothing an extra layer of comfort.



“Emotions are tiring things,” Calran says. “Especially the difficult ones. In the days after the sickness, many of my tribe brothers spent a lot of time sleeping. It is something I was prone to, also.”

He toys with a lock of my hair, stretching it out to its full length, then letting it coil back up again.

“I admire your hair very much,” he says. “It is so very different. Beautiful.”

“Difficult is the word you’re looking for,” I say. “Taking care of it, keeping it nice, is hard work.”

“I wish I could offer you assistance, but it is not like raskarran hair. I would not know the ways to care for it properly.”

“My mother taught me the tricks when I was just a little girl. It wasn’t easy to find the time or the resources - even a few tiers off the bottom like my family were, we didn’t have a lot.”

It was a more comfortable living than the other girls experienced, but not by much. No education, no freedom, no rights - just slightly more skilled work for us to be trained into. I remember hearing Simon and his friends talking about their place in the hierarchy - how they had earned it, how much better than those beneath them they were. No one on my tier had that delusion. We knew we were kept out of the bottom by the luck of the draw alone.

“Do you have everything you need for it here?” Calran asks, shifting so he’s almost over me, but only to better look at me as we talk. It’s funny how well I can read his intentions. How safe I feel already with him.

Because he stopped when it mattered. And I know he would do so again.

“I’ve had to experiment a little,” I say. “But mostly it’s just having the time. That’s not something I’ve struggled to find since coming here. Raskarrans live life a lot more slowly than we did back home.”

“I hope that is a good thing.”

“Well, I wouldn’t have been able to have a nap in the middle of the day where I came from.”

Calran pulls a horrified face before giving me the kind of grin that makes heat coil low in my belly.

“I do not think your tribe chiefs were very wise, then,” he says, snuggling closer to me. “Midday napping is a very agreeable activity.”

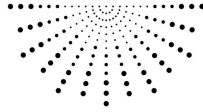
I have to agree, but my mind wanders back to the cave. His hands on my body. That was more than just agreeable. Until it wasn’t, but right up until that moment, it was wonderful. I want to feel like that again. Almost need to.

*Be brave, be brave.*

I reach for his hand, draw it underneath my covers.

“Would you touch me some more?” I whisper.

## CHAPTER SIX



Calran

*M*y cock jolts in my leathers at her soft, shy question. I nearly groan at the surge of need that rises in me, but I hold it back, control myself. My Grace is being brave, and I would not reward that with actions that might give her cause to fear me.

“I would like to touch you very much,” I tell her, giving her a brief kiss, before slipping beneath her covers with her. “Would you like your clothes off, or should I touch you through them?”

She is wearing only a light nightgown. It would not be so intense as skin against skin, but perhaps that would suit her better.

She chews her lip for a moment. “Would it be okay if you touched me underneath my clothes, but I keep them on? I think I would feel safer.”

I kiss her mouth again, resting a hand on her thigh a moment before pushing up underneath her nightgown.

“I am grateful that you tell me such things,” I say, running my fingers up the curve of her belly, brushing just beneath the swell of her breasts. “Please always be so open and honest with me, so that I might always best take care of your needs.”

I graze my thumb over the taut peak of her nipple, and she lets out a small gasp, her body arching into my touch.

“You like being touched this way, I think,” I say, nuzzling at the sensitive spot on her neck as I roll her nipple between my thumb and finger. “So very sensitive here.”

“Yes,” she says, all breath. “Very sensitive.”

“When you are more comfortable with me, I should like to taste you here. To tease these little buds with my tongue.”

I lick at her neck, and her lips part, a moan escaping them. My sweet, responsive linasha. She fears she cannot know pleasure, but she is writhing at the very idea of my tongue against her flesh.

“Is there a heat building between your thighs, Grace?” I say, speaking my words, hot and urgent, against her neck. “Does your skin grow slick with your need?”

She whimpers. “Yes.”

“Would you like your mate to touch you there? To stroke that spot you have that makes you squirm with pleasure?”

“Oh, yes.”

I trail my hand along her body, dipping beneath the garment she wears to cover her sex. I would rather tear it off, but I honour her choice to remain clothed. If doing so allows her to relax into my touches, then it is no hardship to me.

I find the little peak that gives her such great pleasures, circling it with my finger, varying the speed and pressure of my touches the way she likes. Soon, she is gasping and panting, her head thrown back as pleasure courses through her, her nightgown riding up around her thighs.

“I will use my tongue on you here as well,” I tell her, letting all my desire ring out in my voice. “You would only have to ask me to, and I would lick through your folds, tasting your sweetness. I would use my tongue to make you every bit as wild as you are right now, working your cunt until you peaked.”

A sound like a sob rips out of her throat, and she is so close, I think, her body at the very edge of release. I draw closer to her, kissing at her neck as I keep working that spot

between her thighs. She gasps and moans, but does not peak, her body tense and tight, her fears keeping her from reaching release.

“So beautiful,” I tell her, making the same rumble in my chest that I used to calm her before. “So perfect.”

I do not know if it is my words, or the rumbling, but one or the other is what my Grace needs to hear. With a cry, she reaches her climax, her body clenching and shuddering as waves of pleasure course through her. I continue to stroke her, trying to coax as much pleasure as I can from her, finding her lips with my own and claiming them as she starts to come back down.

“Oh,” she says. Then again, “oh.”

“You are surprised you have felt such things so soon, or that you can feel them at all?” I ask, continuing to kiss her neck, nuzzling my nose into her skin and breathing the sweet scent of her deep into my lungs.

“Both,” she says. “That was...”

“Good?” I offer, giving her a teasing smile.

I am pleased when she laughs, even if her cheeks darken and she buries her face into my chest as though embarrassed.

“It was good, yes,” she murmurs against my body.

“Good.” I wrap my arms around her, holding her close to me.



I am drawn out of the dreamspace by voices calling my name and Grace's. I do not know how much time has passed, but guess it must be mid afternoon from the quality of the light bleeding through the walls of our tent. Grace rouses next to me, and I see a look of concern come into her eyes as she hears the voices. I reach for our bags, handing hers to her, before pulling on my own leathers and stepping out of the tent.

It is Anghar who is come, carrying his linasha on his back. He grins at me, giving me a cheerful wave.

“Do not be concerned,” he calls, still smiling broadly as he sets his Ellie down on the floor. “We have come to bring Grace back to the village, for Sally has started her labouring.”

Now I understand why his smiles are so very wide this day. It is a joyous thing, a new birth for the village.

“My Grace will be pleased you have come for her,” I say, gripping Anghar’s shoulder in greeting.

Ellie slips from Anghar’s side over to the tent, calling my Grace’s name as she goes. Anghar watches her a short way, then turns back to me.

“I hope you are not too displeased to have your sweet moon cut short.”

“If it must be cut short, then this is perhaps the best reason. It has been too many long seasons since I set eyes on a newborn youngling.”

“Some of us have never seen one before,” Anghar says, voice growing soft with wonder.

He is younger than me by some seasons, would have been perhaps four or five seasons when the sickness struck. In some ways, it is easier for the younger ones - they have few memories of what they have lost, have grown always knowing their lot. But more often than not, I am grateful for the memories I do have, even if they have the power to cut me. I would rather remember the beauty of my nieces’ faces than to be spared the hurt of having lost them by never knowing them in the first place.

Grace emerges from the tent, dressed and looking resolved, her healer’s confidence replacing the shy uncertainty she has shown around me. It knocks the breath out of my lungs to see the change in her, and my chest bursts with pride that I can call this magnificent female mine.

Well. Almost. I may not be able to say it quite so plainly yet, but I am sure my Grace will warm to the words, eventually.

And if she does not, that will not change the truth in our heartspaces. The words do not need to be spoken for them to

be true.

She is mine. And I am the luckiest male to ever walk these forests.

“We will pack your camp up now and then we can hurry back to the village,” Anghar says. “I know the quickest paths from here.”

Ellie must have already relayed this plan to my Grace, for the two females have already packed most of the things in the tent. For the sake of speed, I collapse the tent down without packing it away properly, swinging my pack and the tent up over my shoulders. Ellie takes my Grace’s pack, leaving Grace unburdened. She looks confused for a moment, until I scoop her up into my arms. A slight sound of protest escapes her, but then she settles against my chest, her arms going around my neck, and we head back through the trees towards the village.

We arrive to a buzz of excitement. My Grace is immediately swept away to attend to her healer’s duties, and I watch her until she disappears inside the healer’s hut. My brothers are quick to surround me with more questions, but I fend them off, heading instead for my Grace’s hut. I intend to unpack our bags, to ensure everything is tidy and clean for when my Grace finishes her healing work. Labouring is a long, tiring thing, for the healer as much as for the mother, and I would have my female’s comforts taken care of for her so that she need not do anything for the rest of the evening.

I knock on the door of my Grace’s hut, in case Molly is inside. When I get no answer, I enter, breathing deep the scent of my new home. It smells of my Grace’s hand salve and a feminine scent that is not all my Grace. The main room is tidy, except for some clothing thrown over the back of one of the chairs. Of the two bedrooms, one has the curtain ajar, revealing an unmade bed and baskets piled high with unfolded clothes spilling out from between them. Molly’s room, I guess, for my Grace is tidy and careful. I set down the packs I am carrying and close the curtain over it, wanting to respect Molly’s privacy, then head into my Grace’s room.

As I expected, her room is orderly, neat. I know I am right in my assumption that this room is hers because her scent permeates everything. For a long moment, I sit at the edge of her bed, the bed we will now share, and just breathe it all in. My throat grows thick with emotion as I run my fingers over the pelts we will sleep under, imagining all our nights ahead of us, bodies curled together.

I unpack our things, and when I am done with this, I head to the hut that was mine for a single night and bring my other things over. It amazes me how much delight there is in simply stacking my baskets next to my Grace's, this small blending of our lives. An inconsequential thing, really, but a symbol of things of much greater consequence.

My mate. My linasha. It does not grow any less astounding to me.

I am almost finished when I hear the door opening. I am quite sure that the footsteps I hear do not belong to my Grace, so I am cautious as I leave the bedroom, not wanting to frighten Molly. She still starts when she sees me, her eyes growing wide. I press my fist to my heartspace in greeting.

“Good day, Molly,” I say.

She watches me warily for a long moment, eyes narrowed in suspicion or distrust. She does not look like my Grace. If I did not already know that they were only mother and daughter in spirit, I would have suspected it. Where my Grace has curled hair, a light brown in colour, Molly's hair is dark. Their faces are different shapes also, their skin different tones.

But there is a similarity between them in their manner. Molly is more outward in her distrust, but I wonder if it comes from a similar place to my Grace's - a hurt in her past. It aches at my heartspace to think that she might have suffered something akin to my Grace. I doubt somehow that Molly being a youngling would matter much to a male who would buy a person.

“Hello,” she says eventually, using a raskarran word. Then she turns abruptly, heading into her bedroom and letting the curtain close behind her.



It is not the most warm of greetings but we do not have so many words to exchange between us. I am simply pleased that she said something for now.



It is late afternoon before Sally's youngling is born - a female she names Marsal. There are many raskarran and human heartspaces full to bursting as Jaskry hands his daughter round, beaming pride on his face. A lucky male, truly, to be blessed with three healthy younglings. I only hope many more of my brothers, old and new, are so blessed.

My Grace is a little while longer appearing, attending to Sally's recovery. When she does emerge, she wears an expression of exultant exhaustion, her hair tied back with a scarf to keep it out of her face. I go to her, leading her to a chair and finding her refreshment. She has cleaned her hands, used her salve on them. The smell of it tickles at my nose. Beneath it, the scent of blood and sweat and the healing work she has done this day. A new life brought into the forest with help from her hands.

To my great delight, she draws me down into a seat next to her, shuffling close so I can wrap my arms around her. Her body sinks into mine, and I cannot help but sit up a little straighter to know that she draws comfort from my closeness, my strength.

We feast and celebrate the new arrival. Many of my brothers drink too much poffi berry brew, their good sense leaving their headspace. I join with the first toast, but decline all others. I wish for a clear head tonight and tomorrow, no matter how joyous a celebration this is.

As the evening grows late, we start to head back to our huts. I help my Grace to her feet, wrapping an arm about her shoulder as we head together to our hut. Ours. I like how this feels in my heartspace and headspace both. Molly walks beside us, and shares a few quiet words with my Grace. There is a tension in our youngling's shoulders that I cannot interpret without understanding her words, but I will speak to my Grace of it when we dream together.

Molly goes straight to her bed when we arrive home, drawing her curtain shut behind her. I follow my Grace to our own bedroom, noticing how she suddenly grows shy as she peels off her clothes, changing into her nightclothes. There is a hesitance in her movements as she slips under the covers, an anxiousness in how she looks to me. I stroke my fingers down her cheek, then draw her to me, tucking her body against mine so she is enveloped in my warmth, her back pressed to my chest, her head nestled beneath my chin. Quickly, sleep starts to spread through me, my limbs and eyes growing heavy.



“Did you not want to touch?” my Grace asks as we arrive in the dreamspace.

There is a vulnerability to her question, and perhaps this makes me a bad male, but my heartspace soars to hear it. She wishes for my touches, worries that I did not wish to give them to her again.

I brush my fingers through her hair. “Very much. But I think you find it more comfortable and enjoyable when we can speak as well as touch. I thought you might prefer it if we kept certain things to the dreamspace for now.”

The unease in her expression fades, replaced by growing joy, and then she throws herself into my arms, kissing me fiercely.

After I have made my joy in touching her well known, I draw her into my arms to talk.

“Would you speak to me of what is troubling Molly?”

I feel my Grace stiffen a little, but it only takes my hand soothing over her arm a few times for the tension to melt back out of her.

“She’s worried that we don’t want her living with us. Not long ago, she wanted nothing more than to have a hut of her own. Now she desperately wants to stay.”

There is exasperation and warmth both in my Grace’s voice.

“She has realised how lucky she is to have such a caring mother,” I say. “But why would she fear we would make her leave?”

“She thinks we’ll want our space, our privacy.”

I look round at the dreamspace. “We have all the privacy we could ever need right here.”

I am so attuned to my Grace’s body now, I feel the slight hint of tension going through her again.

“You don’t mind?” she says. “You really don’t mind only touching here?”

I roll onto my side, facing her. “The rains will come soon. By the time they have ended, I should think we will have shared in dreams long enough to start to understand one another in the waking world. If by then you feel comfortable to speak and touch in the waking world, then we shall try it. If not, then we shall keep our pleasures to this place. It is no pleasure for me to touch you where you are less comfortable, Grace.”

Her gaze is soft, but there is a curiosity behind it. “I don’t think it’s much pleasure for you just touching me.”

I would correct her in this, but her gaze travels down my body to where my cock is hard in my leathers, and even the touch of her gaze against it robs me of the ability to speak.

“You’ve shown me such wonderful pleasure,” she says, her tongue darting out to wet her lips. “Would you show me how to pleasure you?”

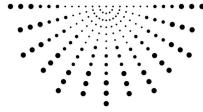
I kiss her, deep and long. When she is relaxed, her skin hot with need, I find her hand, draw it down to my leathers. I loosen the ties, pushing them down my hips, before bringing her hand around my cock. I keep my own hand wrapped around hers, guiding her movements, the pressure, the pace. It is not long before I am breathing hard, a pressure building low in my abdomen as I race towards my peak. I crush my lips to hers, kissing her hard, and her little moans are enough to send me over the edge. I growl my release, hips jerking into our interlinked hands as pleasure courses through me.

“Was that good?” my Grace asks, kissing along my jaw.

I chuckle. “Better than good, linasha.”

The word is out of my mouth before I can think better of it. It is not calling her ‘mine’ but it is at the same time, and I fear I may have just ruined a perfect moment with my careless speaking. But my Grace just smiles, nestling closer to me, and I wonder if already she is growing comfortable with the idea of belonging to me. If perhaps she is realising that it is not something to fear when the belonging goes both ways.

## CHAPTER SEVEN



Grace

*I*figure we'll have some time to live in the perfect little bubble we've created, that we can exist in the simple joy we've found before life intrudes. But the bubble shatters the next day when Maldek returns to the village without Sam.

The raskarrans immediately head out to look for her, despite the torrent of rain that falls from the sky, endless, unrelenting. They're used to it, I guess, having weathered this season every year since they were born, but I know I'm not the only one among us girls who's wondering if there's any chance at all of them finding Sam while it pours like that. The hunters can track an ensouka herd across the forest, but that depends on them leaving footprints, broken branches, trees stripped of leaves in their wake. One small human woman isn't going to leave much of anything behind her. And anything she did leave would soon be washed away.

"Is there any chance they'll find her?" Molly asks as we wait for Calran to return.

I sigh. I want to give her hope, but I won't lie to her.

"There's never no chance," I say. "Until we know for sure what happened to her, there's always a possibility that she's okay somewhere. But I don't think it's very likely."

I don't know what I'm expecting her reaction to be, but she just drops her head against my shoulder, sniffing back

tears. I wrap my arms around her, and we're still sitting like this when Calran returns.

I know immediately from his expression that they haven't found her. He's wet through and must be cold, but he crouches down beside me, pressing his forehead to mine in expression of his sorrow. Then he turns to Molly, gripping her shoulder lightly. Molly's lip wobbles, then she wrenches herself away from us, heading for her room and pulling the curtain shut behind her. I rise from my seat to follow her, but Calran catches my arm, shaking his head slightly, before raising his hand in a 'wait' gesture. Then he kisses my brow and heads into our room.

I fetch some fresh water in a pan - one thing that isn't in short supply while the rains fall. I keep three pots outside at all times and bring one in as and when I need it. Setting it over the fire, I sprinkle in some of the tea leaves we use, making Calran a hot drink. When he emerges from our room, dressed in fresh, dry clothes, I hand it to him, and he gives me a grateful smile. Only when he's finished drinking it does he incline his head towards Molly's door.

I nod, then take a deep breath before heading over, drawing back the curtain just enough for communication without raised voices.

"Molly? Can I come in?"

I think I hear a sniffle, but in the absence of a clear 'no', I decide to take a chance. I slip through the curtain, drawing it closed behind me, then head over to the bed.

The room is a mess. It's been a mess since day one. Clothes scattered everywhere, various trinkets and things she's acquired left haphazard on the floor. I've tried telling her to sort her things out, but she invariably gets angry with me for trying to mother her when I'm not her mother, so I'm letting it slide for now. She's been doing better lately, engaging with the other girls and with some of the chores around the village. I'm hoping before the rains are out, we'll be able to have a conversation about responsibility and taking care of the things she's been given by the raskarrans. I don't even think it's that

she isn't grateful. I think, like all of us, she's just struggled to overcome whatever darknesses are in her past. I have to remember how much harder it must be for her, being the only person in her age group, and give her as much leniency and grace as I can.

Perching on the edge of her bed, I rest a hand on her shoulder. She's curled up under her furs, facing away from me.

"Want to talk about it?" I ask.

I expect rejection, or at the very least, silence. But Molly rolls onto her back, looking up at the ceiling, if not quite at me.

"Why do bad things always happen to the best people?" she says.

Something in the way she says it makes me think she's not just talking about Sam.

"Bad things happen to good people, and good things happen to bad people. It happens the other way round, too. We just remember it more that way because it seems so unfair. But it's not to do with fairness or karma. The universe is just random, there's no higher power guiding things. We get lucky, or we get unlucky. Think about Lorna - she got so unlucky she nearly died, but then she got very lucky to meet her mate in Shemza. Neither had anything to do with her being good or bad. She was the same person when she broke her arm that she is now."

"But what about Lina?"

I pause, trying to consider the raskarran goddess fairly. It's clear that they believe she's a presence in their lives, guiding them. Lina chooses their mates for them, as they see it. Calran would believe she chose us for each other. Do I believe that? Mostly not, but a part of me wonders sometimes. Particularly when Liv talks about how Gregar shouldn't have been able to connect with her over such a distance. If he hadn't, we'd have all died, no question. Lina, or just damn good luck?

"It's nice to believe there's a goddess looking out for us, isn't it? But whether she's really there, or just a name for

coincidence and fate, I see her as more of a nudge in the right direction than an iron fist moving us around like pawns. We still have to make smart choices, work hard. I'm sure Sam and Maldek did those things, but if someone else made bad choices..."

"Lina wouldn't be able to nudge them out of it," Molly says.

I stroke her hair back from her face. She looks so very young right now, staring up at the ceiling overhead, eyes looking into the past, I think, not the present moment.

"We should make some food," I say. "Would you like to help cook, or would you prefer to stay in here a little while longer?"

I try not to make it sound like there's a 'right' or 'better' answer. I want her to do whatever is best for her emotions right now. But I am pleased when she sits herself up, straightens her hair and clothes and turns to me.

"What are we making?"



Liv calls off the search for Sam a couple of days later. None of the raskarrans are ready to give up, but the rains have been pouring for three days. There's just no chance they'll be able to pick up a trail, even if there was ever one out there to find.

A somber mood settles over the village. Nobody goes to the gathering hut for a couple of days, each of us choosing to keep to ourselves, dealing with our grief in our own way.

It's harder than losing Penny on the beach. We might have come as far as the raskarran planet together, travelling through space over months, but we didn't forge the same bonds that we've made since coming to the raskarran village. We were still thinking like lower tier citizens, not like family. Though Sam has been away from the village longer than she was present here, she's still a big part of that family.

And now she's gone. It's a blow to everyone.



Even Darran's tribe, who never knew her, share in our grief.

"Any member of a tribe lost is a terrible thing," Calran says to me in the dreamspace. "But to lose another female when we are so recently reacquainted with them..."

I can only imagine the feelings it must be stirring up in him, the pain of remembering the women of his tribe lost all those years ago. We don't fool around at all that night, just hold each other, comforting each other, most of the time without need for words.

"It pains my heartspace to think of my brothers so lost that they would hurt or take a female," Calran says at one point, after a long period of silence.

I trace the tattoos on his arms, knowing he's thinking about the Cliff Top tribe that attacked us when we first arrived at Gregar's village as much as he is the marauders who attacked Walset's tribe and Sam.

"Your people have suffered so much," I say. "People who've suffered... they don't always make good choices."

"No." His voice is heavy, but there's a lightness to his eyes when he looks at me. "It makes me all the more grateful for my brother and his strength as our tribe chief. It is so easy to imagine what might have been for me and my tribe brothers had he not held us together. Kept us walking Lina's path."

"I'm very grateful for that, too." I press a kiss to his shoulder, at a place where many of the lines and swirls on his arm overlap. "What are the tattoos for?"

His chest expands a little, that very raskarran way of showing pride so adorable on him.

"They are earned by the best warriors," he says. "When I was a youngling, we travelled to different tribes often. Usually for the purpose of meeting females, hoping to find our mate, but when you travel such distances, it is good to have a secondary purpose. So it is not a waste if your dreams remain empty. The Cliff Top tribes had competitions. Young warriors would compete to show off their skill with weapons and in

fighting. I may not have found my mate, but I found success in the competition. They invited me to stay and train in their special warrior ways, so I remained with them for most of a season. When it came time to leave, I had earned all these markings for my skill.” He deflates again before continuing. “They were good males, all of them.”

“I believe that.” And I do.

Calran turns to me, pressing a gentle kiss to my lips. “You have a compassionate heartspace, Grace. If you were to have markings on your skin, that would be the thing you earned them for.”

It would be easy to wallow in the hurt of losing Sam for the next few days, but life must go on. Things don’t stop just because of a loss. Us lower tier girls are well used to that, and it doesn’t take long for things to start resuming. The patrols never stop, of course, the safety of the village far more important than our feelings, but there’s also the washing, the cooking, the repairs and other tasks saved for the rains. It can’t all be put on hold indefinitely.

For me, that means healing work. Checking in on Callif as he recovers from his terrible injuries. He’s not in any danger of dying anymore, but he still needs consistent care - bandages changing, wounds checking, reapplication of salve, as well as increasingly some physiotherapy to improve his strength and range of movement, though that mostly falls to Shemza. I can help him walk a couple of laps around the healing hut, but I don’t have the strength to do much more than that. Rachel, being pregnant, can’t even do that much. Callif won’t allow her to.

Molly keeps herself busy in her room at first, braiding bracelets for the tribe, but I encourage her to sit in the central room where the light is better, and the fire will keep her warm. Calran watches her with interest, then manages to mime to her that he would like to learn how she makes them. Despite the hollow feeling grief has carved into my chest, I can’t help smiling as I watch them working together. Calran doesn’t have the deft fingers required to make the bracelet really neat like Molly does, but when he presents his effort to me, tying it

round my wrist with pride, affection blooms inside me. Molly rolls her eyes, but she's smiling, too.

"I think she is starting to tolerate me better," Calran says later.

I have to laugh at his choice of words. Teenaged raskarrans must be very similar to teenaged humans.

"It's very hard not to," I say, snuggling close to him. "You're kind and thoughtful and persistent."

"I hope you do a little better than tolerating me," he says, his grin turning heated and wicked.

It's amazing how much my response to that look has changed. When we first met in the dreamspace, it filled me with fear and apprehension. Now, it only fills me with need. We haven't indulged in any touching since Sam went missing, instead spending our dreamspace time talking, consoling, supporting each other. I hadn't realised until now just how much I missed the intimacy with him.

But then Calran's expression fades, concern replacing it.

"I should not speak so when we are so soon after losing your sister."

I shake my head, pressing a kiss to his lips. "Losing Sam - it's hard. But it reminds me that life is short, that I should enjoy the time I have. Sam would have wanted that. She loved everything about this world. Desperately wanted a raskarran mate. I can just picture her somewhere, telling me off for not taking every opportunity to kiss mine."

"Well, we would not wish for your sister's spirit to be displeased."

His tone is both teasing and serious. For raskarrans, death is not an end, just a return to their goddess. I'm not sure where I stand on afterlives, but it does give me a small measure of comfort to believe that some part of Sam is out there somewhere.

I press myself close to him, reaching for his cock, stroking my fingers over the hot, smooth length of it as his own hands

quest between my thighs. I wasn't sure I believed him when he said that pleasuring me was a pleasure for him, but since learning how to bring him to climax, I've come to understand the joy of knowing how to touch your partner. The delight of feeling them respond.

And in a strange way, it's helping me detach what happened between me and Simon from anything that Calran and I share. Because there was no delight in any of that, no attention to each other's needs. It's a whole separate thing in my head now, easier to push out of mind, and as Calran's fingers glide through my folds, brushing carefully past my entrance, never quite touching it, the need to feel him inside me drowns out the fear of humiliation and pain for the first time.

"Calran," I breathe. "I want you inside me."

He pauses, looking down at me, heavy brows knitting together as he studies my face.

"You are sure about this, Grace?" he says, tone gentle.

In answer, I draw him down into another kiss, arching my body closer to his. He growls low in his throat, his cock twitching where it's pressed against my belly, then his hand spreads my thighs once more, fingers circling my entrance before he presses one inside.

I gasp at the invasion, my body clamping down on his finger. Panic flutters at my edges, but Calran kisses my neck in all the most sensitive places, driving any fear away with the soft heat of his lips. Then he kisses further down my body, drawing my nipple into his mouth as he starts to pump his finger into me, stroking my inner walls as his tongue laves me. The dual sensation is overwhelming and perfect and soon I'm crying out as wave after wave of pleasure builds in me.

"My Grace," Calran growls, and he must be lost in pleasure of his own, because he's normally so careful not to refer to me that way.

I wait to be repulsed by the term, to want to retreat from it, but instead, a single syllable tumbles from my lips.

“Yes.”

Calran’s mouth covers mine again, kissing me hard and demanding. When he draws back from me, it’s to growl out another word.

“Mine.”

“Yours,” I answer.

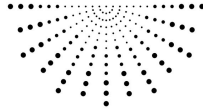
Another finger probes at my entrance before sliding inside. I cry out as my body stretches, the pleasure of being filled far greater than any discomfort. Calran’s movements grow more frantic as he pumps his fingers into me, thumb circling my clit. I’m so close to the edge, one more touch in the right place will have me totally undone.

It happens when Calran presses the softest kiss to my lips. An orgasm detonates inside me, stronger than anything I’ve felt before. I scream as pleasure crashes through my body, overwhelming my senses, my vision going white for a long, intense moment.

I come back to the sensation of Calran nuzzling at my neck. I can feel his smile against my skin. As the prickle of sweat evaporating fades, the dreamspace returning my body to a neutral state, I turn to him.

“I think, perhaps, that was a little better than simply ‘good’?” he says with a wicked smile.

## CHAPTER EIGHT



Calran

For the first time since the sickness struck, passing the rains is a pleasant experience. It still has its discomforts, of course, and the memorial we hold for Sam and for all those we have lost is a darker, harder moment, but overall, the time goes quickly.

I have my patrol routes memorised now, my knowledge of the forest around Gregar's village almost as good as the knowledge of my own trees. There is no sign of trouble from other tribes, much to the relief of everyone, and the deeper into the season we get, the more we are all able to relax.

It is a joy to spend time with my brothers, old and new, in the gathering hut that - much like the one in our village - has only held the belongings of the people we have lost for so long. Filling the space with life and laughter helps to heal wounds in all of us that we have carried so long, we had forgotten what it was not to have them. We eat together regularly. Talk late into the evening. Often, the elders will bid Molly to sing as she did at the memorial, her voice far more beautiful than even the loveliest birdsong. It is a precious gift she has been given, and I am sure to tell her so through my Grace.

The gathering hut is also used by the females for their lessons in *reading* and *writing* - strange human methods of communicating without speaking - but also for lessons in speaking the raskarran tongue. Sally speaks our words like she

was born to them, and the sunset haired female, Rachel, is quick to learn them. Between them, they teach the rest our words, building from naming things to forming thoughts and ideas.

It is something Molly likes to practise with me as we wait for our midday meal to cook. She has a sharp headspace and learns quickly, as younglings so often do, and I do not think I am misinterpreting her to say we have bonded over these practise sessions.

“I wash the clothes in the pools,” she says, nose wrinkling with concentration. “You wash the clothes in the pools. She wash the clothes in the pools.”

“Washes,” I correct. “She washes.”

Molly grimaces, then repeats, “She washes the clothes. Washes, washes, washes. *Whydutheyallhavetubediffrent?*”

“I don’t know,” my Grace says in response. Our understanding of each other is getting better every day. Now, even when she is not speaking directly to me, I tend to understand most of what she is saying.

“*Sannoyin*,” Molly says, and though her meaning is no clearer than it ever has been, I can read her frustration in her tone.

“Please tell Molly that she is doing very well,” I say to Grace. “She speaks raskarran words far better than I could hope to speak human ones.”

I have tried to learn some of their words, but they do not stick so well in my headspace. Humans have a cleverness in a way that raskarrans do not, I think. They might be defenceless against the creatures of the forest, but what they lack in size and strength they make up for in the quickness of their headspaces.

My Grace relays my message, and Molly’s cheeks brighten with a pleased blush, even as she rolls her eyes at me, shaking her head as if to say I am being far too exaggerated in my words. She receives praise like someone who has never been given much before. I know from my Grace that Molly left a

family behind when she came to these trees. I have to wonder what kind of family they were to fail to notice the wonderful qualities Molly has.

She is a fine youngling, and will grow into a fine female in another few seasons. Any father would be proud to name her daughter.

After we have eaten, Molly helps Grace to clean up, then announces, “I go to Carrie now. We make clothes for Marsal. Very small clothes.”

Her eyes shine with delight as she says it. Her heartspace is very taken with our youngest sister.

“Okay,” my Grace says, smiling. We are both very proud of how hard Molly is working at her chosen craft.

Molly grabs her bag of sewing things, then heads for the door, turning back at the last moment.

“You have youngling?” she asks.

Her phrasing is awkward, but her meaning is clear enough. I see my Grace trying to hide her flinch.

“If Lina chooses that for us,” I say.

Molly squints as she works to decipher my words, then nods. Her eyes cut to my Grace, and she is a perceptive youngling. I think she knows that she has caused discomfort with her question. But she is also clever enough not to say anything further. I try to convey with a look that I will care for her mother, that she does not need to worry. She swallows heavily, but nods, then heads out into the rains.

I rise from my seat, going to my Grace and slipping my arms around her. Lately, we have been using the time that Molly spends away from the hut to enjoy each other in the waking world. My Grace grows more relaxed all the time about intimacy and feels comfortable to do many of the things we do in the dreamspace while awake. But it is not such things on my mind as I hold her to me, rather a desire to comfort her. To ease the hurts that still trouble her headspace and heartspace far more than they should.



“The thought of younglings still troubles you,” I say, careful to keep my voice as soft and kind as I can manage. These conversations are always difficult for my brave Grace, and I would not do her further harm with a carelessly chosen word or tone. “Is it that you fear I want them and you do not? Or that it is something that may not be possible for us? Or am I wrong in both these thoughts and it is something else entirely?”

With so many newly mated pairs with younglings on the way, I know it must play on my Grace’s headspace. I know the male that owned her considered her a failure for not providing him with a youngling, but there was so much wrong with that situation. I find it hard to understand why my Grace would hold his thoughts and feelings so close.

My Grace goes tight in my arms. I rub my hands over her shoulders and neck, trying to soothe some of her fear and discomfort out of her.

“Speak of your thoughts to me, my Grace,” I say, pressing a kiss to her cheek. “These things are always easier when shared.”

She sighs, melting into my touches some, but her arms are still crossed about her chest - a sure sign that she is trying to keep herself together.

“It’s... hard,” she says, voice cracking.

“Would you prefer to speak in the dreamspace?”

Our communication is so much easier now, but in the dreamspace there is still less chance that we will misunderstand one another.

She turns in my arms, looking up at me. I expect her to say something, but instead she kisses me. A hard, desperate sort of kiss. Despite myself, I respond, my cock stiffening in my leathers, my lips parting to meet her kiss fully. But this is not a kiss of love and affection, but one of distraction, and I do not think entertaining it will help my Grace.

Still, I am a weak male, for we are in the bedroom, my body over hers, before I can draw myself back enough to stop.

Breathing hard, I drop my head into the pelts next to hers, clutching her tight to me so that she might know that it is not lack of desire for her that makes me stop. I hope it softens my withdrawal some.

I turn us so we are lying side by side, my tail looping about her leg and drawing it to me. We are entangled, our limbs intertwined, my forehead pressed to hers. Without mating fully, it would not be possible to be closer. I hope it makes my Grace feel safe.

“You are not yourself, my Grace. Please speak to me of what troubles you, so that I might understand and help.”

She blinks rapidly, liquid pooling in her eyes before spilling past her lashes and trickling down her nose.

“You’re such a wonderful father to Molly,” she says. “You would be a wonderful father to our child.”

I smile, my chest puffing up a little with pride at her assessment, even though I should be focused on her hurts.

“I am glad you think so,” I say. “But why does this fill you with such anguish?”

“Because,” she says, her voice small and pained. “What if I can never give you a child? What if it’s like with Simon and we try and try and try and nothing happens? What if he was right and I’m defective?”

If I could kill that male three times over, I would.

“Not all mates are blessed with younglings, it is true,” I say. “But that is not the fault of either person. Sometimes Lina has another path in mind for us. We are blessed to have Molly for our daughter, and perhaps Lina would consider that blessing enough. Perhaps it is for us to be helping hands to the others in the tribe as they experience parenthood. I remember when my nieces were born - how difficult it was for my brother and his linasha. Raising a youngling is no easy thing. Your sisters will find your support invaluable - as their healer and their friend. But, my Grace, we do not yet know if we are not to be blessed with younglings of our own. We are not grown old enough that our bodies are not capable. Sometimes

these things happen straight away between mates, sometimes they take time. There are six seasons between Jassal and Ahnjas. Carrie and Endzoh grow no youngling yet. Blessings come when they come, and we are not out of time. Not for many seasons yet.”

Her eyes are wide with hope, still shimmering with emotions. I brush away one of her tears with my thumb, tracing the now familiar shape of her face. She is so beautiful, my fierce, brave mate.

“Won’t you be disappointed?” she says.

I consider how best to answer the question. I will not lie to her, not ever. Not even to protect her heartspace.

“Of course I would be,” I say. “It fills me with joy and excitement to think of a youngling with your curled hair and my features. But a disappointment in our fate does not equate to a disappointment in you, my Grace. It never could.”

This time when she kisses me, there is nothing hard or desperate about it. A bit of dampness from her tears, perhaps, but she kisses me with deep affection and feeling. I respond, drawing her closer to me, and when she reaches for my leathers, I do not stop her. I reach for her top instead, pulling it over her head, before drawing her body back tight to mine, our skin pressed together.

Soon we are both naked and panting, her cunt slick with her need, my cock pulsing as she works it with her hand. Our mouths have barely broken contact, and I am ready to drive her over the edge, to feel her come apart on my fingers, when she suddenly draws back from me. I stare into her eyes, looking for signs of distress. But she just runs her tongue over her kiss-swollen lips, then draws me over her so my hips settle against hers, my cock aligning with her entrance.

“My Grace,” I say, voice hoarse. It is the one act we are yet to complete. The one boundary that still exists between us. And though I am desperate to be inside her this way, I will not if I have any doubt that she is ready.

“Please,” she breathes, arching her hips into me. “Please, Calran.”

Such sweet commands, and no sign of hesitation or fear in her expression. Just longing and want as deep as my own echoed back to me.

I press into her, taking my time, giving her plenty of opportunity to tell me to stop, to express her discomfort if she feels it. But her body is so wet and ready. I glide into her with little resistance, groaning as her tight warmth envelops me. I draw back before pressing forwards again, going a little deeper with each stroke until I am fully seated inside my linasha, our hips locked together, bodies and spirits joined as one.

“Are you okay?” I ask her, stroking her hair back from her face.

In response, she strokes her fingers over my face, tracing the line of my cheekbones down to my jaw, drawing me in for a soft, sweet kiss.

I move slowly to start, giving her body time to adjust to my invasion. I keep my thrusts shallow, gentle, paying attention to her sounds, her expressions. When moans slip past her lips, when her eyes close, her expression turning rapturous. Her cunt flutters and clenches around my cock and it is a pure, exquisite torture.

Our bodies were made to fit together, my hips nestling perfectly between hers, my mating node moving over that sensitive nub of flesh she has at the peak of her cunt, stimulating her every time I move. It is not long before she is gasping and writhing, overcome by pleasure, and my heartspace surges in my chest to see it, to see the sweat slicking her curled hair down, her head thrashing from side to side as I start to move faster, thrust into her harder. Her cunt squeezes me tight as she cries out, reaching her peak.

Then I am as lost in the act as she, my mind blank of everything except the feel of her. I move against her, relentless, until a second climax tears through her, leaving her sobbing with pleasure. A pressure builds in my own abdomen,

but I am a greedy, selfish male. I would have her come apart beneath me one more time before my own release.

I hook her leg over my shoulder, shifting our positions so I can drive into her deeper. I roam a hand over her breasts, pinching her nipples and kneading her sweat slicked flesh. Ragged moans rip from her throat, her hands fisting the pelts beneath us.

“So beautiful,” I say, knowing my words have the power to drive her higher. “So perfect. Your cunt feels so good, tight and warm and so wet for me.”

My release grows ever closer, and I growl as I try to suppress it, grinding my hips into my Grace as she pants, almost thrashing about beneath me.

“I’m so close,” she moans. “Oh, god, Calran.”

My hips snap against hers harder, driven by her sweet words. I remember how my Grace’s body likes contrasts, and as I mate her with abandon, I turn my face, pressing a kiss to the inside of her leg, soft as I can manage.

She screams beneath me, her cunt clamping down on my cock. I roar, snapping my hips into her a final few times as my release crashes through me. I let her leg fall to the side as I collapse down over her, bracing my weight on my forearms as we both breathe hard through our aftershocks. Only when the sweat cooling on my back starts to make my skin prickle, do I roll to the side, tucking myself in next to her and drawing the pelts up over our exhausted bodies.

“There is nothing, linasha, defective about you,” I say, as I wrap my arms around her still trembling body. “I would have your vow that you will never say such things about yourself again.”

“Only if you promise we can do that again,” she says.

I chuckle.

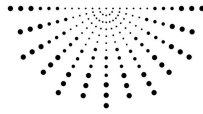
“We will do that again as many times as you like. Whenever and wherever you like.”

“Good,” my Grace says. “Better than good.”

“Perfect?” I suggest.

She sighs contentedly. “Yes. Perfect.”

## EPILOGUE



Grace

*Four weeks later*

I head into the lab space where Lorna is still bent over one of Mercenia's computers. There was one of the machines in the medic offices where I worked, but they were only used by supervisors, not by myself or any of the medic staff. I wouldn't know where to begin using one, but Lorna has the benefit of a top tier upbringing and education. She knows how to get information out of the computers.

"How are you getting on?" I ask.

We've been here a couple of days now, and the discomfort of being around Mercenia built things is only outweighed by the discomfort of wondering what the hell they were doing here in the forest in the first place. It's clear this building has been abandoned for a while, but that doesn't offer much reassurance. Mercenia bothered to make a base here, bothered to stash a load of women in cryostasis in the basement. There must have been something they wanted. We need to know what to properly assess the chances of them ever coming back.

"It's difficult," Lorna says. "There's plenty I can access without passwords, and some of the passwords are written down, so I can get at the information. But I'm not a scientist. I understand less than half of what I'm reading, and a lot of it is like notes, not complete thoughts." She shakes her head, squinting at the screen. "They were definitely researching something. There's a lot of information here about local flora

and fauna. Photographs, observations, samples and then a load of science stuff that I don't understand. Lots of talk of genetics and genomes."

"Samples?" My stomach drops. "Did they have captive raskarrans?"

Lorna's expression darkens, and she glances at the doorway where Maldek is talking with Gregar. Maldek has been Lorna's shadow this entire trip, looking out for her in Shemza's absence.

"I think so," she says, keeping her voice low. "I haven't said anything to anyone else yet, because I want to be sure. I know the raskarrans won't take that idea well."

No. It would be devastating to them. When there are so few of them left, to think that some of their number might have been taken. Kept as prisoners.

"It gets worse," Lorna says. "I don't understand what they were doing, but... This operating system." She gestures at the computer screen. "It's old. Really old. Like, older than what I used when I was first starting on computers at school."

Lorna is twenty. She would have first started schooling fifteen years or so ago. A computer system older than that - the implication makes my stomach go cold.

"I can't prove anything," Lorna says. "Maybe the chain of cause and effect isn't sinister. Maybe the sickness came, and that's why they abandoned this place."

I don't think she believes that any more than I do.

"We need a scientist," she says, turning back to the screen. "Even if I didn't have baby brain, I wouldn't be able to decipher most of this. Do you think any of the women in the pods...?"

I doubt it, somehow. Mercenia are famously big on not letting their upper tier women be anything other than housewives. Perhaps there are some middle tier scientists, but would they have the education and the power to end up on an expedition in space? And if they did, why would they be left behind, frozen, when the other people here abandoned this



place? No, I suspect the people in the pods in the basement are women like us. Lower tier, expendable. What exactly they were needed for is just another question we can't answer.

I head down there now, descending the stairs, heading past the various lab spaces, the infirmary, the shower block, to the room at the end of the corridor. I'm not surprised to find Liv sat against the back wall, watching the pods. There are twenty of them altogether, all containing a human woman.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

She looks drawn, pale. I know she's been struggling with fatigue, thanks to her pregnancy - far more so than she lets on around Gregar, who wouldn't let her get out of bed if he thought she was struggling even a little. While I understand her desire not to send her protective mate into unnecessary overdrive, I have questioned the wisdom of her making this journey with us. It's obviously left her drained.

"We can't leave them down here," she says, ignoring my question as she stares up at the pods.

"No," I agree.

"But we can't absorb another twenty people into the village. Not yet. We don't have enough huts for everyone as it is. The expansion is going well, and our reserves are getting back up to more reasonable levels. But the tribe needs to adjust to the current influx of people. We can't just introduce even more."

"The raskarrans would probably argue for waking them all up now, everything you just said be damned."

Liv manages a small smirk. "I know. I wondered at first whether I could be a good chieftess to the tribe. I've never been a leader. But it turns out a lot of what I have to do is talk excitable raskarrans out of doing things. Be the voice of reason. They'll want them waking up because they'll be desperate to find their mates, I know that. But I don't think it would be fair or right for these women to be absorbed into the tribe right now. You don't have a house, we've got no food security, things are in utter chaos. Oh, and you'll probably

have to shack up with one of the big green guys and have his babies. I'd rather introduce them from a position of stability."

"That sounds reasonable and logical," I say, wondering what's troubling her about all this. "Could the tribe spare a few warriors to make an outpost here, guard them against those other raskarrans coming back?"

Liv nods. "I was thinking a rotation. Spend a couple of weeks camped out here, then a new group comes out, takes them off duty. It's too far to travel here and back in a day, even if they aren't slowed down by short-legged humans."

And they'll all be willing to do it. No one would argue or protest against it.

"So, what's the problem?" I ask.

Liv inclines her head towards the pods. "Do we need to know what they know about what Mercenia was doing here?"

The question hangs heavy in the air between us.

"Do we know that they'll know anything?" I say.

"No, but the same logic can be applied the other way. Lorna has been talking about science experiments."

Liv is clever and cynical enough to have made the same connections I did.

"We need to know," Liv says, firmness coming into her voice. "We need to know what Mercenia was up to, and what the chances are of them coming back."

I remember those days on the beach, Liv telling us all that Mercenia wouldn't be coming for us, that we'd have to make the best we could of our new lives in the raskarran forest. I remember the arguments about staying, waiting for Mercenia to come back. Being torn about staying or going. I knew Mercenia probably didn't have good intentions for us girls, but going with the raskarrans was giving up on everything I'd ever known. Part of me would have preferred Mercenia to arrive, take the decision away from me, return me to familiar hardship.

Now, the thought of Mercenia coming back here makes cold dread run down my spine. I think of my work with Shemza and Rachel, Molly, the community growing between the tribes. Calran and the deep, ever-growing love we have for each other. I don't want Mercenia to touch any part of any of that.

"We do need to know," I say. "But, you're right. We can't wake them now. Another month or two and the huts will be finished. Lorna might have managed to decipher a bit more of the information - there's plenty of stuff in folders, written down, that she can take back with her. We don't even know how to open the pods safely. You need to give her time to figure that much out, at least."

Liv dips her head. "True. Ugh, I just hate to think that through inaction, I might leave the tribe vulnerable. The raskarrans might think they can protect us - and from threats from their world, they can."

"But not threats from ours."

Liv doesn't respond.

"This place has been abandoned a long time," I say. "What reason would Mercenia have for coming back for it now?"

Liv's expression goes completely dark for a moment. But then she smiles at me.

"You're right," she says, voice bright but sharp. "You're right. We have to deal with what's in front of us. We don't open any pods until we know how to do it without hurting the women inside. Their lives are far more important than Mercenia theoretically returning. One thing at a time."

The next smile she gives me is warmer, more genuine.

"Thanks, Grace, I appreciate your advice. Most of the decisions made for the tribe - we discuss them together, me and Gregar. But this - whatever we decide to do with all of this," she gestures round the room, "it's on me. Gregar doesn't understand. He can't understand. I'm grateful to have other people around me that do."



Later, as Calran kisses my neck, trying to initiate some sex before sleeping, I find I can't get thoughts of Mercenia out of my head.

"You are troubled, my Grace," Calran says, drawing back from me only enough to put an arm round me and pull me into an embrace. "Speak of what is on your mind."

I wonder if it's the right thing to do to tell him, but then I remember how he asked me to always tell him what I was thinking and feeling, so he would never overstep with me. That helped us build our relationship, helped me to overcome my past and my struggles. Continuing will keep our relationship strong.

So I tell him about the coincidence of the timings, the fact that raskarrans were probably held here - maybe just for study, maybe for something worse. I tell him about my conversation with Liv and the frightening possibility that Mercenia might return, and what I fear that could mean for the tribe. For us.

I let it all out in a torrent. When I'm done, I look up, expecting to see fear, apprehension, maybe confusion in his expression. I'm surprised to find him looking relaxed, resolved.

"I am not worried about these things," he says, stroking his fingers through my hair. He still loves to play with the curls, stretching them out to their full length before allowing them to ping back into place.

"Don't you think you should be? Just a little?"

He shifts us so we are facing each other, gazing into each other's eyes.

"It troubles me some," he says. "An unease in my heartspace at the thought of my brethren kept in this place. But I kept faith with my goddess when things were at their darkest. When the sickness came and it seemed that all was lost, I trusted in her ways. And now she has brought you to me. I do not believe she would give me such hope and joy only to have it taken from me again."

“She couldn’t protect you from the sickness...”

“Because it was new. Your people have been here, have left their mark on Lina’s forest. And you are here, sharing in her dreamspace with me. Lina knows your people now. Should we need to be, she will ensure we are ready to protect what is ours from them.”

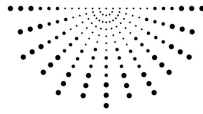
He kisses me, and his confidence, his certainty, melts away some of my unease for now. And as he rolls on top of me, fingers questing for the edges of my clothes, a thought fills my mind. A firm, unwavering thought.

That whatever comes, it won’t just be the raskarrans who are ready to protect the tribe. It will be us girls, too.

Mercenia took everything from me when they allowed Simon to buy me. And I had so much less ‘everything’ then. In the tribe, my friends, my work, Molly, Calran, I’ve found an everything that fills my heart more than I could have ever imagined.

And I won’t let Mercenia take them without a fight.

## EPILOGUE 2



Maldek

*Two months later*

I volunteer for guard duty at the Mercenia hut as much as I can. My brothers think I am still punishing myself for Sam, and in part, this is true. I still feel guilt in my heartspace that I let her be taken. Seeing her so happy with her mate - her mate who she would never have found otherwise - only goes so far to ease my lingering discomfort.

But the real truth of it is that I come for her. The female in the middle of the first row of *Pods*, as the human females call them. There are no words in my own tongue for the strange contraptions that these new females sleep inside.

Sleep inside unendingly. Liv tells us they are frozen, that they have been there many seasons growing no older, asleep and unaware of the turning of time. A little like the hibernation of the creatures of the forest during the big rains, but no sunshine breaking through the clouds will rouse them. Liv does not know how to wake them. Lorna spends long days and nights *reading*, trying to find this information, but so far it has eluded her.

And I am stuck guarding the females, my mind on one in particular.

I watch her now, only her face visible through the small window into the *pod*. I cannot see the colour of her eyes, her expression is fixed in place. But even this is a clue to her

personality. Where the others appear as though restfully sleeping, this female's lips are pressed together, as if remaining asleep displeases her.

The heartspace knows, Vantos has always said. And I might have teased him for his devotion to his Rachel, or about how a female so fine as she could have devotion to such a sombre, serious male. But I have never doubted his word. His heartspace knew, and in its knowing, he forged a path for the rest of us to find our mates when the dreamspace is not forthcoming.

I look at this female and I know.

"You're hiding down here again, brother?" the cheerful voice of Razhan calls down to me.

I turn. "Has my watch come round so quickly?"

Razhan waves a dismissive hand. He is one of Walset's tribe, and good company on these long empty days of guarding. Not too serious and not quick to take offence at teasing - qualities I have always appreciated.

"You have some time yet, don't worry. You may continue to pine for your female without guilt."

"Who says I am pining?" I arch a brow, though I am curious if he has noticed I pine for one in particular.

"We're all pining," Razhan says, grinning broad enough to bare his fangs. "You think to convince me you're any different?"

I grin back, inclining my head in acceptance. Razhan laughs, clapping me on the shoulder.

"It is true," I say, as if acknowledging something greatly embarrassing. "I have pined for a female of my own since we first saw our tribe sisters on the sands."

"And there are twenty more now. My heartspace is at once overjoyed and yet counting still how few that is to share amongst us." He presses up close to one of the *Pods*, peering in through the window at the face inside. "Do you think they're aware of us? Do you think they dream of handsome

males come to guard them? That they might favour us when they wake?"

"You better hope not, with your talk of sharing them out like poffi berry brew."

Razhan smirks, but his expression turns serious, longing. He moves to the next *pod* along, then the next, peering into them each in turn.

"I shouldn't be so careless with my words, it is true," he says, stopping at my female's *pod* and pressing up close to the window, bracing himself a little on the strange, cool surface of it. "They're our sisters even if they yet sleep, and a blessing from Lina, whether one will join in my dreams or not."

I know his curiosity is only what I have felt for my other tribe sisters, but the sight of him pressed so close to my female makes my jaw tighten.

"Razhan! Maldek!" A voice calls from above. "Come for your meal before the broth gets cold."

Razhan turns at the sound of the voice, pushing away from the *pod* with one hand. As he does so, the contraption makes a loud, unnatural noise. Razhan jolts away from it as if it has stung him and we both hold our breath, waiting for something further to happen. When the beating of our heartspaces has slowed, we look to each other, relief on Razhan's face.

"Perhaps it's not good for us to pine away down here," he says, scrubbing at his unruly hair with a hand. "These human creations are strange and unnerving to my headspace."

"I am inclined to agree," I say, though I still turn back as we head up to eat, still linger a moment in the doorway, taking one last look at my female's face.





Thank you for reading Surrender! I hope you enjoyed it. It would mean the world to me if you could leave a short review. It's one of the best way readers can help their favourite authors.

### **What's Next?**

If you don't follow my Facebook page, you're probably wondering where the hell the next book is. Mr Fox and I became first time parents a few months ago, so writing has had to go on the back burner. Next up is Rardek's story, and I'm working on it now. No concrete release date yet, but hopefully soon!

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Heather Fox has been inhaling science fiction romance for years and decided it was high time she wrote some of her own. She writes books with devoted alien males who love to tend to their female's every need. Because what girl wouldn't want a devoted, sexy partner with extra abilities and, ahem, appendages?

She lives in England with her husband (who is not an alien, but sure behaves like one sometimes) and politely asks American readers to forgive her British-isms. She's always available on the other end of an email if you ever need a translation!

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